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**Bronze Seduction: The Shaping of Latina Stardom  
in Hollywood Film and Star Publicity**

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**Bronze Seduction: The Shaping of Latina Stardom  
in Hollywood Film and Star Publicity**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my former clients at TAPP,  
the Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting Project, in San Francisco.

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This dissertation explores the construction and ideological implications of Latina star images in Hollywood film and film publicity in the last nine decades, through in-depth case studies of the publicity that shaped the public images of actresses Dolores Del Rio in the mid-1920s-early 1940s, Rita Moreno in the 1950s and 1960s, and Jennifer Lopez in the last decade. In particular, the shaping of each star's image is analyzed in light of contemporary tendencies in Latina star promotion, including an emphasis on excessive, seductive bodies. The author documents how Latina stars have been demarcated as distinct from white stars since the transition to sound film, with this distinction positioning them as embodying a "lesser whiteness," even while they also have been considered "all-purpose ethnics" able to easily portray Asian and American Indian as well as Latina roles. In this process, white femininity and Eurocentric beauty ideals have

been protected and enhanced in Hollywood film and related publicity. Such paradigms are shown to reflect the status of Latinos in the U.S. and Hollywood at specific sociohistorical junctures. Within these dynamics, Latina stars have provided challenges to the status quo that have necessitated negotiation in their appearance, publicity, and film roles. As the dissertation documents, traditional Hollywood paradigms are both reified and under challenge in the present day, with current stars and shifting beauty standards reflecting contemporary shifts in the social landscape. Demographic changes, cultural shifts, and the rise of Latino-produced media have brought about an increased awareness and interest in the profits to be made from Latina stardom, while industrial structures and age-old perceptions continue to contribute to a decided ambivalence inherent in the marketing of Latinas as star figures.



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## Chapter 1

### Bronze Seduction:

#### The Shaping of Latina Stardom in Hollywood

When I began this project in the fall of 1998, Ricky Martin was shaking his bon-bon for television audiences and “J.Lo” was just rising star Jennifer Lopez, an actress drawing the spotlight with her professed pride in her curvaceous body. Hollywood films for the first time in decades could boast a growing roster of Latino/a stars well known among even non-Latino audiences, including Lopez, Salma Hayek, Jimmy Smits, Benicio Del Toro, Michelle Rodriguez, and Lupe Ontiveros.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it comes as no surprise then that numerous media outlets declared in 1998 and 1999 that Latinos were “crossing over” into American entertainment. In a “Latin USA” cover issue *Newsweek* announced the rise of “Generation Ñ,” while *New York* magazine, renamed *Nueva York* for its own cover issue, trumpeted the new “Latino explosion.” Meanwhile, Geraldo Rivera and other media shills devoted shows to what was often described as a “wave” of

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Latino/a” and on later references, the shorthand of “Latino” to refer to men and women of Latin and Spanish-speaking descent throughout this dissertation. “Latina” is used for female-specific references. I also use descriptors of nationality (i.e. Mexican, Puerto Rican) when this will provide useful additional information. Debates regarding whether Latinos are a “race” or an “ethnicity” continue to be fought and are beyond the scope of this project. What I do want to emphasize, however, is how Latinos have historically been constructed in the U.S. as a minority group, as Chon Noriega describes, “legally white but socially ‘black’” (*Shot in America* xxvi). Moreover, I use the term “race” with the understanding that racial categories are not biological constructs, but rather categories that have been constructed socially, as described by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States*. As Omi and Winant argue, the social process of racialization has established and maintained these categories in society such that they hold the weight of real categories. For lack of a more concise term, “non-white” will be used throughout this dissertation to refer to people racially not of 100 percent European extraction. The terms “Anglo American” and “white” will be used interchangeably to refer to Americans of full European descent.

Latinos entering the fields of U.S. entertainment, cultural life, sports, and politics.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of whether this media emphasis reflected actual or lasting changes, an interest in all things Latin seemed to have taken hold, at least temporarily, in American popular culture.

While the success and grand-scale promotion of such performers as Lopez and Martin perhaps signaled progressive tendencies afoot within the U.S. entertainment media in relation to Latino culture and entertainers, however, the actual behind-the-scene scenarios and media artifacts of Latino stardom didn't always match the optimism nor the hype. Most notably, hints of contradiction could easily be discerned. Today's Latino stars, as even the most cursory of surveys of Jennifer Lopez and Ricky Martin's publicity reveals, tread a delicate balance between stereotype and authenticity in their star promotion, as well as in terms of appeals to different ethnic audiences.

This precarious balance is nowhere more notable than in the presentation of Latino, and particularly, Latina star bodies. With respect to the performers who were spotlighted in this recent "Latin wave," Latina faces and bodies were showcased as beautiful, sexy, and above all, exotic. Although it's true "sex sells" for actors of all ethnic backgrounds,<sup>3</sup> Latina actors appear to have the most difficulty escaping publicity that labels them as exceptionally and innately sexy/fiery/irresistible, with these qualities inscribed in particular on their bodies as star texts. Ricky Martin's bon-bon aside, one illustration serves as a vivid case in point: On October 9, 1998, Jennifer Lopez graced the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*, the photo consisting of Lopez wearing only a pair of black tights, a satisfied smile, and posed with her back to the camera, a pure fetishization of her

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<sup>2</sup> Mireya Navarro, John Leland and Veronica Chambers, "Generation ñ." *Newsweek* (July 12, 1999), and *New York's* "Latino Explosion" issue (September 9, 1999). Geraldo Rivera dedicated one of his news discussion shows on MSNBC Network to Latino "crossover" during the week of December 26, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> A point Sandy Varga, then-advertising manager of *Latin Heat* magazine, made during a personal conversation during my field research in Los Angeles in 2000.

posterior. A two-page centerfold photo inside the magazine was in the same vein with Lopez's rear end filling a good deal of the right-hand page. The headline, "From here to DIVANITY," the I's in DIVANITY curved like a voluptuous woman, reiterated that Lopez had arrived as a celebrated, or at least heavily hyped, Hollywood body, a moment to be explored further in Chapter 4. In a development not lacking in irony, this publicity surfaced at a time when Lopez's position in Hollywood was becoming less dependent on playing sexualized or stereotypical Latina roles. Echoes of such body-obsessed promotion can be discerned in the media coverage of other contemporary Latina stars, while retrospective examination of their predecessors' publicity demonstrates that this is not a new phenomenon. There is much to learn from an exploration of such contradictory dynamics.

In addition, Latino performers in Hollywood in the 1990s often were referred to as "crossover" stars, even if they grew up in the U.S. and didn't speak fluent Spanish, as I discuss later in this chapter. The use of this term with respect to Latino film actors is relatively recent, having entered the popular lexicon in the 1980s. Regardless, it has quickly become a standard element of Latino star promotion, inscribing Latino and Latina performers in a manner that other non-white performers generally do not experience, as somehow un-American. What sort of figurative borders are reflected or maintained in this industrial and popular culture construction?

The subtle complexities of the current crossover paradigm are particularly striking in light of the history of Latino and Latina stardom, for Latino acting hopefuls have not always been marketed with this sort of star promotion. Changing social and historical contexts, as well as industrial developments in U.S. film, have established radically different openings and opportunities for Latino actors in different eras. Most notably, many questions can be raised regarding the changes that have taken place since the heyday of silent film, when a handful of

Latino actors managed to achieve success and were promoted in a manner on par with white actors. Silent film stars of the middle and late 1920s such as Dolores Del Rio, Antonio Moreno, Ramón Novarro, and Lupe Velez were considered box office draws equal to many of their Anglo contemporaries and as simply “stars” rather than crossover stars. While long-standing notions of *Latinidad* (literally, Latin-ness) did play into their publicity, career opportunities, and resulting star images, each actor headlined a number of successful feature films, making for a Latino roster of major Hollywood (and global) stars that is only recently beginning to be matched.

The current body-focused promotion of Jennifer Lopez as a star figure also highlights the aesthetic and related ideological nuances that at times have distinguished the gender-specific marketing of Latinas in U.S. film and popular culture. A specific focus on Latina actors, which I have chosen to emphasize in this dissertation, also highlights the differing opportunities that have been afforded to Latinos and Latinas in Hollywood in various eras, as I discuss in further detail later in this chapter.

Thus a number of questions regarding the shaping and power of stardom are prompted by such a research topic, the historical and contemporary construction of Hollywood Latinas. What has been at stake in the making and marketing of Latina stars and how have these stakes remained the same and/or changed throughout the last nine decades in Hollywood? Is the present emphasis on “excessive,” seductive bodies a constant element of this history? And how can this emphasis be interpreted with respect to the evolving status of Latinas in U.S. popular culture, and the film industry in particular, in the three time periods in question?

To begin to answer these broad questions in this dissertation, I utilize a “historical snapshot” approach in the form of three in-depth case studies of individual stars through which I explore how Latina star images have been

constructed and shaped in Hollywood film publicity and films. As will be further discussed in the Methodology section of this chapter, this trio consists of Latinas who arguably achieved the apex of stardom possible in three separate time periods: Dolores Del Rio in her Hollywood heyday from the mid-1920s to the early 1940s, a period which spans the transition to sound film; Rita Moreno in the 1950s-60s, as the industry was emerging from the structure and strictures of the studio system; and Jennifer Lopez from the early 1990s through the millennium, a time of New Hollywood filmed entertainment production and an increasing trend of multi-media stardom. Issues of ethnic relations in various eras, shifting mores of gender and sexuality, as well as evolving ideals of beauty and the body as they impact on Latina representation, are also explored in this examination of the media construction of the Latina star.

In the following section, I discuss the importance of these questions to this research project. I subsequently survey the scholarship that has informed this work and provided guidance in my exploration of Latina stardom, and more specifically, the star construction and careers of Dolores Del Rio, Rita Moreno, and Jennifer Lopez.

## **THE IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF LATINO AND LATINA STARS**

The stakes here are about more than entertainment. They're about who we allow to dance inside our imaginations and why (Zook 64).

As scholars such as George Lipsitz, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, and Richard Dyer (*Heavenly*) have documented, and as will be explored later in this chapter, media representations and stars in particular play a powerful role with respect to reinforcing the status quo in American society. This situation is one that appears stacked against many young Latinos and people of color in general.

Stardom has evolved into an immensely profitable business for American entertainment industries. As a result, millions are now spent by U.S. film studios, production companies, and related industries each year to create and promote stars that will appeal to the widest possible audience. Latino and Latina performers still are seldom promoted in such a manner, however, despite the fact that Latinos now make up more than twelve percent of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census 2000). Given the dramatic under-representation of Latinos in the Hollywood star system, and especially as protagonists in film and television, Latino viewers have to look much harder and longer to find positive role models than their Anglo American counterparts. Studies of television representation, for example, have documented that Latino characters have comprised no more than two to three percent of all prime-time roles since the 1950s, even while the Latino population has grown exponentially (National Council of La Raza). A more recent study by Children Now found that Latino representation had dropped from three to two percent of all prime-time characters in the spring of 2001 (*Fall Colors*).<sup>4</sup> And while Latino stardom and Latino television and film representation are not equivalent, they are directly related. This is an imbalance that can arguably have a negative long-term impact, especially on young Latino viewers and with respect to the opinions that non-Latinos form of Latinos.

In my previous career as a social worker with Latina teen parents, I had a number of personal experiences that illustrated this imbalance. One of my most vivid memories is of screening the film *My Crazy Life/Mi Vida Loca* (1993) for young women served by the agency in a support group. The girls appeared riveted, and when we talked about it afterward, many of them said that it was the first time they had seen a Latina actress such as Seidy Lopez or Angel Aviles, “someone like them,” as a lead in a Hollywood film. Jennifer Lopez, Salma

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<sup>4</sup> See also Subervi-Vélez, Berg, et al. “Mass Communication and Hispanics” for an extended bibliography on this topic.

Hayek (who actually had a small role in the film), and other contemporary Latino and Latina stars were just beginning their Hollywood careers and weren't yet in the public eye. In addition, such Latino-oriented magazines as *Latina* and *Estylo* that profile Latino celebrities had yet to be founded. This was therefore as close as we could get in 1995 to seeing young Latinas as the stars of an American film. In comparison, white actresses were literally everywhere and African American female actresses and performers could easily be found, with some of the most visible in this time period including Angela Bassett, Vanessa Williams, Whitney Houston, and Janet Jackson.

Through this experience, I was reminded that Latinas have almost no role models in film or other entertainment media (although this has improved somewhat in the last few years), as well as few public images that cast them as smart, capable, or beautiful. Considering that within the popular media "ideas, myths, fictions, ideologies, and social models are produced, displayed, negotiated, and contested," to extend Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's commentary in reference to American theater (*José* 8), one has to wonder at the impact for young Latinos of such an extreme imbalance in media representation.

Previous scholarship at times has addressed this concern with respect to whether media representations reflect on Latinos in a positive or negative manner. I should clarify that I do not strictly subscribe to a simplistic "positive image" school, however. I particularly do not feel that a film character is in any way negative solely because he or she is not a doctor, lawyer, or other high-income-earning professional. For example, some scholars have criticized *Mi Vida Loca* and other films that represent Latinos/as as gang members as reinforcing negative stereotypes that all Latinos are criminally inclined. Instead, I believe that there is an arguable value in having Latino and Latina actors portray film and television characters from all walks of life and in all economic circumstances, particularly when those characters make positive choices from among those realistically



available and otherwise demonstrate positive characteristics. This in mind, I have no objection to the portrayals in *Mi Vida Loca* when this film is balanced with others that portray Latino characters in other walks of life.

When it comes to film characters in starring roles, the broader phenomenon of stardom raises other important dynamics to consider. As I discuss later in this chapter, star studies is still a relatively young field of academic inquiry within the broader discipline of film studies, and we have barely scratched the surface with respect to scholarship on non-white stars. The limited scholarship that has been conducted confirms that ethnic stars can offer a particular challenge within the American imaginary that we are only beginning to understand, particularly as film stars function as “major definers” of identity and social power (Dyer *White* 8). Given that my scholarship does not include the study of audiences, my intention is not to establish a direct correlation between media representation and social impact. Nevertheless, a number of studies have documented the importance of role models in the mass media to establishing one’s self-image and views of other groups.<sup>5</sup> As these studies have found, role models in the media can play a strong role in helping young people develop a positive sense of self and of aspirations for the future. We learn from such role models what sort of a life we can hope for, literally what to aspire to, as well as what to expect of others’ impressions of us. Will others think we’re smart, capable, trustworthy, and attractive, or unintelligent, untrustworthy, and/or unattractive? These are powerful messages that can play a determining factor in the futures of all young people.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. George A. Comstock with Hae-Jung Paik. *Television and the American Child*. George Gerbner, Gordon Berry and Nancy Signorelli, *Television and the Socialization of the Minority Child*. A more recent 1998 study by Children Now found that “across all races, children are more likely to associate positive characteristics with White characters and negative characteristics with minority characters” (112), Children Now, *A Different World: Children’s Perceptions of Race and Class in Media*.

Additionally, critical scholarship regarding the construction and impact of Latino stars in Hollywood film and popular culture is scant within the disciplines of film studies, cultural studies, Mexican American/Latino studies, and American studies, a gap that increasingly becomes important to fill. Within star studies and film history, issues of race and ethnicity are just beginning to be addressed. Little work has been done up to this point on non-white film stars or non-white participation behind the scenes in the Hollywood film industry, with Latino stardom and contributions in particular still largely unexplored. Hollywood film scholarship typically has contextualized this history with respect to solely the Anglo American population in the U.S.; it is important to begin to diversify this perspective. Conversely, scholarship within the disciplines of cultural studies, Mexican American/Latino studies, and American studies, while addressing issues of race relations and the racially hegemonic tendencies of the media industries, also has just begun to investigate the social impact of Latino celebrities. This dissertation thus aims to break new interdisciplinary ground.

The time is ripe for this particular project for other reasons as well. Most notably, Latino stardom is important to explore in relation to changing ethnic demographics in this country, as Latinos are rapidly becoming a larger portion of the population. The presence of Latinos in the U.S. has tripled since the 1960s in terms of sheer numbers (from 9.1 million to 35 million) and more than doubled with respect to their proportion of the total population (from 4.5 percent of the population to more than 12 percent today, slightly more than the proportion of African Americans) (U.S. Census 2000). Scholars have just begun to critically examine the impact that this increasing ethnic diversity has had on the media landscape and on popular celebrity in particular.

Perhaps as an early reflection of these shifts, the starring roles portrayed by a handful of Latinos and Latinas in recent films also makes the topic of Latino stardom in Hollywood particularly timely in the realm of academic scholarship.

Actors such as Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, Benicio del Toro, Jay Hernandez, Rosario Dawson, and Michelle Rodriguez have gained critical recognition and status in the industry in the last few years, creating a growing Latinowood within the traditionally white star system. Should the success of these individuals and the popular hype surrounding Latinos in general be taken as a sign that doors are opening to Latinos in Hollywood that previously had been closed? There is a need for research that begins to explore the correlations among these many developments.

In addition, Latino stardom is important to study with respect to the tangible elements behind the scenes in the film and talent management industries that have an impact on whether actors are provided—or more often, not provided—opportunities to prove if they possess more ephemeral “star qualities.” These include the challenges that actors face securing agents and other management personnel, in their aim to be cast in major film roles, and with respect to promotion activities. As has been documented by researchers, most recently in a Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) study commissioned by the Screen Actors Guild, the results of which were released in 1999 and 2000, many, if not most, Latino actors and actresses find it extremely difficult to secure substantial employment in film or television.

According to the TRPI study, the majority of Latino actors still face a fairly uneven playing field in Hollywood. In 1998, for example, Latino members of SAG comprised only 4.3% of total SAG membership, and moreover worked on average only 2.9% of actors’ work days.<sup>6</sup> Latino actors also were generally cast in supporting rather than leading roles, particularly in comparison to white and African American actors. Interviews that the authors of the report conducted with Latino and Latina SAG members gleaned that many felt they were caught in a

bind—considered either “too ethnic” or “not Latino enough” with respect to their name, appearance, or accent—an industry paradigm which retards the casting of Latino actors.

With respect to practical opportunities for stardom, Latinos also appear to have had more opportunity in particular periods to be cast in starring roles in Hollywood films than Latinas. In the mid-to-late-1920s, Ramon Novarro, Antonio Moreno, and later Gilbert Roland were cast in many starring roles, with only Dolores Del Rio and Lupe Velez beginning to match their success. In turn, Anthony Quinn, Jose Ferrer, Cesar Romero, and Ricardo Montalban achieved stardom during the studio and post-studio eras, with Rita Moreno and Katy Jurado never coming close to their level of achievement. Only recently have Latinas been given opportunities that match that of their male counterparts, surveys of Latino and Latina actors' filmographies over the last eight decades reveal.

How then to account for Latina stardom? A handful of Latinas have been able to succeed, while many others never get to leave the starting gate. To begin to interrogate this phenomenon, in this dissertation I explore the careers of a few Latinas who can be considered Hollywood success stories—with as much emphasis as possible on the material aspects of their rise and promotion and the more intangible motivations behind these choices and activities.

The case studies that comprise this dissertation thus examine both the opportunity offered to Latinas in Hollywood in particular eras as well as the evolving construction of female Latinidad in film and popular culture. To this end, a few broad questions guide my analysis of the case studies of Dolores Del Rio, Rita Moreno, and Jennifer Lopez. What similarities and distinctions can be discerned in the public images of the three stars in their respective time periods,

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<sup>6</sup> Harry D. Pachon, et al. “Missing in Action: Latinos In and Out of Hollywood: A Study by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute.” Reprinted in *The Future of Latino Independent Media: A NALIP Sourcebook*. Ed. Chon Noriega.

particularly with respect to the shaping of the actresses' physical appearance? And how can these case studies of Latina stardom be interpreted with respect to the status of Latinas in Hollywood and in the U.S. and related American beauty ideals in these eras?

To begin this endeavor from a grounding in the literature, in the following sections I lay out my theoretical framework by reviewing relevant scholarship from the disciplines of film and media studies, Latino and American history, anthropology, and cultural and gender studies. These broad areas of scholarship include the general dynamics and power of film stardom, the complexities of Latino and Latina stardom in particular, historical tropes and evolving norms of beauty and the body with respect to Latinas and most specifically Latinas as star bodies, and finally, Latino "crossover" celebrity as constructed for white audiences. These topics naturally overlap in many respects. The crux of my study, which I detail after this review of literature, lies in these locations of intersection.

## **STARDOM AND THE AMERICAN IMAGINARY**

Stardom is a dynamic phenomenon with many facets and interpretations in the literature. In this section I briefly review a number of the multifarious definitions of stardom that inform this project on Latina stars. This includes the most basic definition held by professionals in the industry and film studies scholars: stardom as proven audience appeal. Next, I discuss the ideologically focused interpretation of stardom as a national social force, and subsequently the definition I consider particularly important to this research, stardom as the natural result of star *promotion*. Finally, I consider Latina stardom within the current, spectacle-focused mediascape.

Perhaps the one consistent element of all definitions of stardom is that of fame. Star studies within film scholarship tend to define a star in this respect as a

film actor who becomes the object of public fascination to the extent that, in the words of Christine Gledhill, “their off-screen lifestyles and personalities equal or surpass ability in importance” (xiv). When this phenomenon is viewed in purely economic terms, film stars are defined as those actors whose popular appeal is such that they can draw viewers into movie theaters on the strength of their name alone. Stars with such demonstrable popular interest and appeal are considered by industry insiders to be “bankable” and serve as a driving force for film production. While a handful of Latinas have been given the opportunity to test their ability to “carry” films throughout the decades, Latina stardom by this definition has arguably been a sporadic phenomenon in Hollywood film and thus is still largely unexplored in a number of respects.

Additionally, stardom can be understood as a national social force. In this respect, stardom particularly serves to assuage (and challenge) ideological schisms in a society. As Gamson asserts:

[C]elebrity culture is built on major American fault lines; simultaneous pulls on the parts of producers and audiences alike to celebrate individual distinction and the equality of all, to demonstrate that success is available to all and available only to the special, to instate and to undermine a meritocratic hierarchy, to embrace and attack authority (12).

Moreover, a number of scholars have documented the function that stars serve in teaching notions of identity, including notions of gender, race, ethnicity, and class, and in particular, of whiteness.<sup>7</sup> Given the lack of biological basis for racial categories, including that of Latino, the iteration of “tropes of empire” in star texts has long fulfilled the function of assisting in the construction and reification of these imagined categories in this country (Shohat and Stam 137). In this manner

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Linda Mizejewski, *Zeigfield Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema*. Diane Negra, *Off-White Stardom: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*. Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*.

stars traditionally have served as one of the most powerful sites for the construction and reinforcement of the primacy of whiteness, as Dyer argues (*Heavenly, White*). Because of their ambivalent racial and social status, Latino stars provide a particular aesthetic and political challenge to these traditional racial paradigms in Hollywood and the larger American imaginary.

Scholars such as Michael Rogin, Linda Mizejewski and Diane Negra who have studied such constructions in film and star imagery document that through the symbolism of star images, white ethnicity typically is submerged and the racial category of “whiteness” is reified, particularly in relation to “blackness.” Whiteness in this dynamic traditionally has been likened to such qualities as purity, beauty, integrity, and intelligence (Dyer *White*). Through such traditional Hollywood paradigms, non-white stars tend to be positioned as ethnic Others or lesser whites, a process of marginalization in comparison to actors of full European extraction that often entails the employment of contradictory and ambivalent discourses in their image construction and star publicity. Media and cultural studies scholars who have considered non-white film celebrity, including Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Dyer, bell hooks, Donald Kiriara, and Donald Bogle, have documented and addressed these colonialist dynamics.

As an aspect of this phenomenon, the star images constructed for non-white stars traditionally have capitalized to some extent on the employment of stereotypes held by whites of non-white groups. This has often been the case in the marketing of Latina stars. Moreover, such dynamics of “capitaliz[ing] on the economic possibilities of difference,” traditionally have been profitable for the entertainment industries, as Joanne Herschfield argues (xi). These machinations inevitably involve ambivalent and contradictory discourses regarding race, ethnicity, and difference, which I discuss in my review of scholarship on “crossover” and non-white celebrity later in this chapter.

Most important to this study in the discussion of general stardom are questions concerning economics, which highlight the fact that stardom is a phenomenon that cannot be separated from its production. In particular, decisions on the part of executives to promote a particular performer as a would-be star, as well as how and how much, are integral to the production of stardom. Scholars such as Gill Branston and Barry King attest to such “self-fulfilling prophecy efforts of marketing” both stars and hit films (Branston 115). More specifically, with respect to film stars, the opportunity to attain star status generally emerges from such being cast in psychologically or romantically compelling lead roles in films, as well as being promoted through expensive “star treatment” publicity in the entertainment media. Reba L. Chaisson further highlights the “highly selective and political process” of creating Hollywood stars, in that film publicity campaigns greatly determine the critical and financial success of films and thus of the actors that appear in them (79). With respect to these various dynamics, Latinos traditionally have been, and often continue to be, at a disadvantage.

A number of factors play into a Hollywood mindset that seldom considers Latino or Latina actors as being worth the financial investment of star promotion. These include the historical and contemporary invisibility of Latinos in the film, talent management, and public relations industries’ executive circles, as well as a severe under-representation of Latinos in creative positions who might offer more complex and heroic characterizations for Latinos to portray. It is important to remember in any consideration of Latino stardom that industry executives could easily choose to “make” more Latino stars, with social attitudes and financial motivation determining factors in this equation. It also should be noted, however, that this situation is beginning to change. In recent years, the profits garnered from a handful of successful Latino performers underscored the economic potential of Latino stardom. These contemporary trends are discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation, in which I address current developments in



the entertainment industries that are altering the playing field for Latina and Latino stardom.

Finally, stardom necessarily has taken on new permutations in the changing media landscape that are just beginning to be explored by scholars; it is important to begin to plumb where Latina and Latino stars fit within this shifting landscape. Star bodies become increasingly important as promotional texts as “the range of entertainment forms for the commercial construction of fame, as well as the ways in which contemporary cinema delivers that fame,” are rapidly evolving in the current filmed entertainment and celebrity-driven media culture (Branston 106). Star images such as that of Jennifer Lopez are now constructed on multiple sites, including not just film and television, but also music video, web sites, award shows, advertising, and so on. The amount of entertainment and celebrity news, dominated by visual images of celebrities, arguably has grown in pace with these burgeoning media sites. Celebrity bodies thus have taken on greater significance among the morass of commodified spectacle in the entertainment media landscape, the “new cinema of attractions,” as Aida Hozic describes it (206).

Within this new multi-media arena of attractions, an appearance deemed appealingly photogenic, and even more important, “videogenic” across mediums is perhaps now *the* most important element for potential stars to possess. Given the success of Jennifer Lopez, it becomes important to question the impact of these shifts on the nature of contemporary Latina stardom. With respect to the evolving star system and media landscape, the stardom and promotion of Lopez will provide a rich case study through which to explore such contemporary dynamics and issues.

## THE RACIAL RIDDLE AND OTHER TWISTS OF LATINO STARDOM

While Latino stardom is currently under-researched, important work by several scholars has begun to illuminate the field and thus is foundational to my study. In this section I interrogate previous scholarship that has explored Latino and specifically Latina stardom, highlighting a number of patterns that have been discerned. In my explication of these patterns, I discuss the importance of such factors as actors' proximity to whiteness, the historically ambiguous status of Latinos in the U.S. with respect to racial categories, and the sociohistorical climate toward Latinos at particular junctures. I next examine scholarship specifically on Latina stardom, first in relation to the typecasting of Latinas, and finally, with respect to the traditional construction of Latinas in film and star publicity as "excessive" and irresistible bodies.

Latino stardom and star promotion are difficult phenomena to generalize, given the wide diversity of Latino and Latina actors who have achieved a level of fame throughout the history of Hollywood film. A number of patterns have been highlighted in previous scholarship, however. For one, as documented by scholars such as Antonio Ríos-Bustamente, Clara E. Rodríguez ("Visual"), and Hershfield, opportunities for such success historically have been dependent on how closely performers have embodied white beauty and body ideals.<sup>8</sup> Ríos-Bustamente, in his work on Latino participation in the film industry from 1910 through 1945, for instance, makes such a connection between Latino actors' appearance, including phenotypic characteristics such as skin color, facial features, and body type, and the types of roles in which they were cast. As he argues, while some light-skinned Latinos with European features in this time

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<sup>8</sup> Such findings parallel those of Donald Bogle regarding the opportunities afforded to African American performers in film since the 1920s. Bogle documents in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* and *Brown Sugar* that African American actors with light skin, straight hair and "keen" features have traditionally experienced the most and often only opportunities to be cast in starring roles in Hollywood film and receive related promotional backing.

period were given opportunities to be cast in lead roles, darker-skinned actors could only hope to play villains or servants at best.

The rules that limited the “types” of Latino performers considered for casting in lead roles and for promotion as film stars were by and large unwritten and arguably have changed little since these early decades. These rules generally include the necessity of having light skin and European rather than indigenous features, the ability to speak English well and without an “undesirable” accent, and a medium height-to-tall, slim body.<sup>9</sup> In this manner, ethnic notions and national beauty norms have persistently dictated the grouping of Latino and Latina actors as “romantic leads,” or, more often, “character actors” or “extras.”<sup>10</sup>

One marked difference between light-skinned Latino and African American performers of earlier eras was that Latinos were allowed the opportunity to change their appearance and/or name and to “pass” as white. Given the option, at times Latina performers furthered their careers by shedding aspects of their appearance that marked them as Latina. Notably, makeover narratives, popular in the construction of female stars for many decades, have been prominent in the selling of a few of the most successful Latina stars. These transformations in fact are often performed in full view of the film-going public and incorporated into promotional publicity, with Spanish-Irish actress Rita Hayworth serving as the most notable example. In her study of Hayworth, Adrienne McLean describes how a transformation narrative detailing how the actress overcame her Latin look, which included lightening her hair color and having her widow’s peak removed through electrolysis, was a major component of Hayworth’s star image. Such star

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<sup>9</sup> Recent interviews with Latino actors, a casting director, producers, and an agent in Los Angeles in 2000 confirmed that this sort of typing has not diminished.

<sup>10</sup> The main exception that can be discerned to this pattern is Mexican-Irish Anthony Quinn, who managed to play a number of leading-man roles in Hollywood film despite his fairly dark, *mestizo* appearance. Quinn was assisted by the opportunity to demonstrate his acting chops in a number of European films, however, most notably in the role of Zampanò in Federico Fellini’s *La Strada* in 1954.

narratives arguably hold a particular appeal for American audiences when the individual “made over” acquires whiteness in the process, as Negra argues with respect to white ethnic stars who experienced similar treatment. Perhaps not coincidentally, such a transformation narrative played prominently in the star construction of contemporary star Jennifer Lopez in 1999, as I discuss further in Chapter 4.

Additionally, the often ambivalent racial status of Latina stars reflects the historically slippery relationship that Latinos have held to whiteness in the U.S., as highlighted in previous scholarship. Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latino Americans have long held an uncertain status in the American racial hierarchy, a phenomenon that has been documented by such scholars of Latino American history as Martha Menchaca (*Recovering History*) and Clara E. Rodríguez (*Changing Race*). Moreover, within these dynamics, Latino stars have been associated with whiteness or categorized as non-white based on perceived class background as well as appearance, despite the possible incongruity of class markers and distinct “race” markers. Alicia Rodríguez-Estrada, in her comparison of the star promotion of 1920s-1940s film stars Del Rio and Lupe Vélez, both originally from Mexico, emphasizes how this dynamic influenced the construction of Dolores Del Rio’s star image as “foreign” rather than Mexican or ethnic. She asserts that Del Rio’s perceived upper-class background and fair skin had a strong impact on her star image as an elegant foreigner and thus her subsequent opportunity in Hollywood, as opposed to the lesser opportunity she posits was offered to Lupe Vélez, who tended to be promoted in a contrasting manner as a fiery ethnic.

The climate of a particular social era also necessarily influences the status attainable for Latino and Latina stars. As scholars such as Rudolfo Acuña (*Occupied*) and Menchaca (*Recovering History*) document, the position of Latinos in the racial hierarchy of the U.S., and thus within the realm of popular

entertainment, has evolved in relation to historical and social developments. Latinos have been considered “maybe, sometimes white” based on their evolving status and what has been most politically useful to those in power at particular junctures (Dyer *White* 19). In corresponding shifts, Latino actors have faced greater or lesser opportunity in Hollywood. In particular, when Latin culture has been the object of interest among mainstream Americans, Latino performers have experienced peaks in opportunity.

Additionally, Latino stardom also has been influenced by evolving beauty ideals, which also naturally intersect with racialized social hierarchies and notions of nationhood at particular junctures. This element of Latino representation is particularly under-theorized at the present time. For the most part, scholarship that considers the impact of beauty ideals on ethnic stardom has raised this question only with regard to Jewish, other white ethnic, African American, and Afro-British actresses.<sup>11</sup> Regardless, Latinas arguably have been given particular opportunity in Hollywood film during time periods in which a (light-skinned) Latin look has been considered particularly beautiful, such as was the case for Dolores Del Rio and Lupe Velez during the 1920s and arguably may be the case for such actresses as Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, and Michelle Rodriguez today. It should be noted here that *indigenous* features combined with dark skin has never been “in style” in this manner. I will explore the impact of American beauty and body norms on Latina stardom further in a subsection of this chapter devoted specifically to that topic.

These factors that have variously provided opportunity or obstruction to Latino and Latina star hopefuls throughout the last century in Hollywood have been documented in surveys of Latino film representation, although much more scholarship is needed to flesh out this history. López (“Are All Latins”), Charles

Ramírez Berg (“Bordertown”), and Chon Noriega (“Citizen”), for example, point to the many correlations between social climate, industrial agendas, and opportunity for Latino and Latina actors at particular historical junctures since the inception of Hollywood film. A case in point is the substantially more welcoming and open star system that Latinos encountered in the last years of silent cinema. A rage for melodrama and social dancing, social tensions over immigration, and women’s increasing emancipation contributed to a predilection for Latin Lovers on the big screen during this era, as Gaylyn Studlar documents in research on Rudolf Valentino (who was Italian rather than Latino) and Antonio Moreno (who was Spanish) in *This Mad Masquerade*, and which I address in the next chapter of this dissertation. Conversely, the Good Neighbor era of the late 1930s and 1940s prompted a rise of interest in Latina performers such as Carmen Miranda, as López discusses in “Are All Latins From Manhattan?”

In addition, Latino star promotion must be considered in light of the patterns of film representation that these and other scholars have documented, including the typical invisibility of Latino characters, tendency for them to appear primarily in sexual, comic, subservient, and/or criminal roles, and invocation of tropicalist tropes in such characterizations. Such scholars as Arthur Pettit, Berg (“Stereotyping”), and Carlos E. Cortés document these tendencies, generally with a focus on Mexican American representation, in their surveys of Latino and Latina film representation. With respect to the representation of Puerto Ricans in particular, what scant scholarship exists points to parallels between Puerto Rican and Chicano film representation and in fact the typical conflation of ethnic signifiers in film portrayals of the two groups. According to Richie Pérez, Puerto Ricans have tended to be portrayed in stereotypical roles as “social misfits and personally inadequate victims,” often as gang members and delinquents (75).

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<sup>11</sup> See for example, Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, Diane Negra, *Off-White Stardom*, Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark: ‘Race,’ Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema*, and Sarah Banet-Weiser,

Due to the persistence of tropicalist tropes, Latino film characters and stars, particularly female stars, also tend to be characterized through the employment of regional-specific, colonialist associations with Latin America, including "verbal epithets evoking tropical heat, violence, passion, and spice" (Shohat and Stam 138). Latina stars thus often have been considered and described as hot, spicy, passionate, or fiery, or through some combination of or variation on such terminology, whether as "spitfires," "pepperpots," or "hot tamales." Such associations also are extended to the Latina star body, as I discuss further in the next section.

Racialized patterns of casting also have limited the stardom possible for Latinos. Hollywood films, particularly in the studio era, confined Latino performers to limited, cardboard-cutout roles that did little to showcase their appeal or talent. In particular, Latino actors and actresses could portray Latinos or other ethnics in the studio and post-studio eras, but never white characters, regardless of how fair-skinned they might be. Sarah Berry, drawing on the scholarship of Shohat and Stam, asserts that through such racialized casting politics, the true multicultural nature of the pool of actors in Hollywood was replaced with a "visually coded racial hierarchy" in film and thus the American imaginary (110).

In contrast, however, the few "star-making" Latino protagonist roles that have existed in Hollywood film often have been played by Anglo actors and actresses. The role of Puerto Rican immigrant Maria in *West Side Story* (1961), played by Natalie Wood rather than the arguably more authentic Rita Moreno, and of Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, played by Marlon Brando in *Viva Zapata!* (1952), are just two cases in point.

Angharad Valdivia describes such obstructions to portraying active protagonists in film as an example of the "symbolic annihilation," through

stereotyping and invisibility, that Latinos and women often experience in the mainstream media (243).<sup>12</sup> In illustration, Valdivia points to the stereotyping that Puerto Rican actress Rosie Perez experienced in her early film roles. She finds that at this stage of her career, Perez generally did not portray roles with a great deal of autonomous subjectivity. First appearing in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), the characters Perez played in this period were almost always loud, working-class Latinas, largely stereotypical roles in which she served mainly as a mediator who assisted other, non-Latino characters in meeting their goals.

Hershfield, in her analysis of Dolores Del Rio as a star figure in Hollywood and Mexico, similarly asserts, in opposition to Rodríguez-Estrada, that Del Rio generally was not able to avoid the confines of racialized expectations and related "strategies of containment" in her Hollywood film career (Ed Guerrero qtd. in Hershfield 105).<sup>13</sup> I interrogate these two views in my own case studies, finding in general that while Latina stars, including Del Rio, never completely avoid such stereotyping or containment, their transgressive potential also is not completely annihilated or contained.

### THE "EXCESSIVE" LATINA STAR BODY

In addition to this broad theoretical framework with respect to stardom and Latina stardom, my analysis builds particularly on the work of a few scholars who have begun to examine Latino stardom with respect to how sociohistorical notions of race, gender, and class are inscribed on the bodies of Latina stars. I argue in relation to this project that as "racialized" star bodies, Latinas in the public eye generally cannot avoid such inscriptions, although the extremity and

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<sup>12</sup> Gaye Tuchman coined this term in discussion of the representation of women in the media in her introduction to *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*.

<sup>13</sup> Guerrero refers in *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* to how such "strategies of containment" often operate at the level of sexuality even in seemingly progressive film texts (157).



particular valence of these inscriptions varies in accordance with the ideological and practical concerns of specific historical and industrial junctures.

The work of several scholars is foundational to this assertion. As mentioned in the previous section, Shohat and Stam, in their exploration of Hollywood's employment of tropicalist tropes in the construction of Latino characters and stars, point out that such tropes are often inscribed on the bodies of Latinos and particularly Latinas (138). McLean, in her study of Rita Hayworth, additionally argues that Hayworth's publicized half-Spanish background naturally lent an air of eroticism to her physical image, which contributed to her popular appeal (9),<sup>14</sup> while Ana M. López highlights that an emphasis on the body in film roles was part of the appeal of Dolores Del Rio in the silent film era ("From Hollywood").

The ambivalently white/non-white ethnicity of Latina actors additionally raises tensions that necessitate negotiation with respect to their public images, with this negotiation generally carried out in the production and display of the star body in film roles and promotional campaigns. This delineation of *Latinidad* in Latina star images in Hollywood imagery and star publicity was and is often accomplished through the representation of Latina stars as "excessive bodies." A parallel phenomenon is addressed by Negra in her examination of the star images of actresses constructed as white ethnics such as Cher and Marisa Tomei. As Negra elucidates, such excess is often manifest in an emphasis on the "excessive physicality" of stars, often in the form of exaggerated bodies, appetite, sexuality, and/or dress (142-143). While such notions of exaggerated bodies have been successfully utilized in the marketing of Latina stars, it also is often virtually impossible for such stars to subsequently separate themselves from these associations in the Hollywood imaginary.

Berg discusses this construction of excessive Latina types from another vantage point in his delineation of many Latina film roles as fitting either that of the enigmatic Dark Lady (often portrayed in 1930s films by Dolores Del Rio); the passionate and hot-tempered Half-Breed Harlot, such as personified by the cantina girl of many Hollywood Westerns; or the desexualized Latin clown, a role often played by Carmen Miranda (“Stereotyping”). These three types have dominated Latina star promotion to varying degrees since the inception of sound film, and are useful to consider with respect to how tropicalist tropes associated with the Latina body have been distinctly utilized in such constructions. Berg’s first two types, that of the Dark Lady and the half-breed harlot, appear particularly relevant to consider with respect to the star images of Dolores Del Rio, and Rita Moreno and Jennifer Lopez, respectively.

In my own reading, the Dark Lady, whose allure is based in part on an air of mystery and upper-class gentility, is not distinctly racialized to the degree which the Half-Breed Harlot experiences. While her Latin ethnicity is not overtly addressed, her something extra “south of the equator”—as a jealous Anglo woman remarks about Dolores Del Rio’s irresistible Brazilian charm in the 1933 *Flying Down to Rio*—is a subtle but powerful element of her image. As such, the seductive Latina body serves as the structuring absence lending narrative resonance to Dark Lady characters, a dynamic I elucidate on in my case study of Del Rio’s career and star image in Chapter 2.

On the other hand, the Half-Breed Harlot, “a slave to her passions,” is defined by her temper, libido, and sometimes her exaggerated body (Berg “Stereotyping” 113). In this manner the Harlot serves in film narratives as the epitome of the excessive, inviting Latina body. Such a paradigm of Latina

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<sup>14</sup> Rita Hayworth was born Margarita Cansino to parents of Spanish and Irish ancestry in New York City. Her family were also successful in show business, her parents as an extremely popular latin dance duo and her uncle as a dancer and dance instructor.

representation arguably also has valence today; I consider this notion in Chapters 3 and 4 as I deconstruct the star images of both Rita Moreno in the 1950s and Jennifer Lopez in the late 1990s.

Previous scholarship that highlights how Latina stars are often constructed quite differently in the English-language and Spanish-language news media also hints at the historical strength of the trope of the excessive, passionate Latina body in Anglo-centric American culture and the difficulties that Latinas in Hollywood thus have had avoiding overtly sexualized or body-focused star images. In comparing the entertainment news coverage of Dolores Del Rio and Lupe Velez in the English-language film fan magazine *Photoplay* with that in *La Opinión*, the largest Spanish-language newspaper serving Los Angeles, Rodríguez-Estrada found that the two venues had distinctly different emphases in their approach. *La Opinión*, she found, “placed both women on a pedestal” and was particularly concerned that the actresses serve as positive role models for other Latinas, a markedly different approach from that of *Photoplay*, which tended to type the two actresses according to stereotypes of Latinas held by non-Latinos (487).

More recent star publicity illustrates the continuing entrenchment of sexualized interpretations of the Latina star body in the contemporary English-language media. Jennifer Lopez’s zaftig body dominated the publicity for the film *Selena* in the Spanish-language media in 1997, to emphasize her literal embodiment of Latina identity and a “girl next door” innocence to Latino audiences. In contrast, during Lopez’s *Out of Sight* publicity in the English-language media in 1998, a highly sexualized and body-obsessed tone overtook the discourse that accompanied photos of Lopez in the press, although her body was arguably identical in these two time periods (Beltrán), as I discuss further in Chapter 4.

This “different sexual and cultural energy in *gringolândia*,” as Frances Negrón-Mutaner describes it (192), tends to posit Latina stars as passionate, inviting bodies in their star construction within the Hollywood and American imaginary. The historical antecedents of this deterministic construction will be explored further in the following review of literature regarding Latina beauty and bodies, as well as in each case study with respect to the individual historical periods under study.

### **BRONZE BEAUTY AND HOLLYWOOD BODIES**

Latina star promotion has long relied heavily on such notions of the racialized Latina body and American beauty, although these notions have played out in dramatically distinct ways for different stars. To theoretically ground my analysis of how such tropes figured into the shaping of the star images of Dolores Del Rio, Rita Moreno, and Jennifer Lopez, in this section I interrogate previous scholarship on the history and ideological significance of the racialized Latina body, on Latinas and American beauty norms, and on gendered and racialized beauty and bodies in Hollywood.

As a number of scholars and particularly anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Mary Douglas posit, the body is an especially loaded symbol in the overall structure of representation that serves to organize society, “a text on which culture writes its meanings” (Davis 50). Social hierarchies have long been supported by notions and related social dynamics of embodied racialization. Thus given its substantial colonial history, bodily and facial characteristics in the U.S. historically have been associated in the hegemonic public imagination with characteristics such as intelligence, morality, and self-control. Individuals as such are routinely categorized according to facial and bodily characteristics and accordingly to a position within the American imaginary.

Latinos, in particular Mexicans and Mexican Americans, have been categorized in this fashion throughout U.S. history, particularly since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, as Menchaca (*Recovering History*), Neil Foley, and Antonia Castañeda document. Representations in colonial writing, frontier literature, and subsequent cultural forms distinctly racialized Mexican Americans according to several measures; for instance, lighter skinned *Mexicanos* with European features and presumed wealth were considered “Spanish” and accorded the social status of whites, while darker skinned Mexican Americans with what were deemed indigenous (Indian or of mixed racial heritage) features were ascribed traits of and oppressed as “colored” or “Indian.” Mexican Americans were thus positioned in the U.S. ethnic hierarchy while Anglo Americans established and maintained political and social dominance in the Southwest U.S.<sup>15</sup>

As was the case for African Americans and American Indians, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latinos deemed “colored” also historically have been viewed as more body than mind in comparison to whites—and in a related vein, closer to nature, more primitive, less spiritual, and more motivated by bodily pleasures.<sup>16</sup> Nicole Sault elucidates on this phenomenon as one of imagining colonized groups as inferior, “savage bodies” (4). The mixed-blood of Latin American people in particular was highlighted in this construction as dangerous to notions of white racial purity. As Pike describes this line of thought, “In Anglo eyes, the very presence of the burgeoning numbers of a spurious race

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<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Blevins Faery discusses a similar process with respect to the “darkening” of American Indians in Anglo American paintings and narratives in the 1600s, which “reflected and reinforced white beliefs in profound and unchangeable racial difference that provided a rationale for the systematic and violent removal of Indians ever farther westward and into near-oblivion” (158).

<sup>16</sup> Ed Guerrero describes the more contemporary process of racializing bodies in present-day Hollywood film. He states, “[B]lackness has been trapped in expressions of the primitive, the physical body, violence, and eros, while whiteness has been associated with civilization and the refinements and gifts of the mind and intellect” (“Circus” 334).

attested to the inability of Latins to control their passions and to develop the social responsibility that distinguished civilized people” (149).

Such cultural constructions have historically reflected gender distinctions as well. Considering that women have been viewed as more body than mind in comparison to men with respect to notions of Cartesian dualism, a historical paradigm documented by scholars such as Moira Gatens and Elizabeth Grosz, non-white women often have been doubly inscribed as primitive in this manner. National beauty ideals and notions of femininity in this manner are built on hegemonic expectations of the racialized and gendered body. As Lola Young argues, “historically notions of beauty and femininity have long been racialized, although this racialization has not always been explicit or acknowledged” (“Racializing” 67). Such dynamics have served as the antecedent for the emphasis on and interpretation of the racialized Latina body in American popular culture.

This history for Latinas can be traced back to its colonial and post-colonial contexts. Because of the colonization by Europeans of North American land that was formerly Mexico and Puerto Rico, as well as of Latin American countries, Latinas historically have been constructed through colonialist narratives as available and accessible sex objects. For example, stereotypical notions of *Mexicana* beauty and bodies after 1848 were strongly linked to assumptions in Anglo society about the women’s potential marriageability and virtue, or lack thereof. Non-marriageable *Mestizas* in this context arguably were viewed as little more than potential sex objects. As Castañeda describes, “[E]lite *Californianas* were deemed European and superior, while the majority of Mexican women were viewed as Indian and inferior” (225).<sup>17</sup> Systems of colonial domination and social

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<sup>17</sup> As stated previously, these categories were sometimes, but not always strictly based on phenotypic characteristics such as skin color. Indicators of social class such as education, dress, and deportment also influenced the ascription of Mexican American women’s bodies with qualities related to racialization.

hierarchy, in this manner, were inscribed on and maintained through the symbolism of Latinas' bodies, a form of embodied cultural memory (or perhaps more apt, cultural amnesia). As Pettit documents, these notions regarding Mexican American and Mexican women as available to white men and more motivated by physical and sexual pleasure than white women, were disseminated in colonial writings and frontier literature, and ultimately in Hollywood film representations of Latinas.

Given the persistence of these historical tropes, Latina representation in Anglo American culture has constructed *some* Latinas as having particularly sexy, voluptuous, and thus "inviting" bodies, particularly in comparison with bodies associated with chaste white femininity. Certain body parts, particularly the derrière and hips, have at times been emphasized in this construction. This commentary, for instance, calls to mind the "butt obsession" that dominated Jennifer Lopez's star promotion in late 1998, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

It should be noted here that the lower body in particular has historically been demarcated as unclean and/or inferior in Western culture, as Douglas, Mikhail Bakhtin, and other scholars have documented. In the case of Puerto Rican women, it also is helpful to consider, as Negrón-Mutaner posits, the particularities of representations of the Puerto Rican female body, as they tend to include the notion of large, rounded rear ends in direct relation to Puerto Ricans' African heritage. Sault describes this process, the fetishization of particular "savage body parts," as the natural legacy of categorizing colonized groups as inferior and/or sexualized bodies (5).

Scholarship on the history of the representation of African American female bodies is useful to consider as well as in understanding similar dynamics in the representation of Latinas. Most notably, colonialism and slavery in this

country involved the construction of black women as the Sexualized Other, “amoral Jezebels who could never truly be raped,” as Susan Bordo points out (9). Representations of black females that constructed them as irresistible bodies with overly exaggerated genitalia and rear ends were prevalent in the Victorian era, contributing to notions of black women as fair game for sexual conquest. Sartje/Sarah Bartmann, a South African woman with a large posterior who was dubbed the “Hottentot Venus,” served as an extreme illustration of this colonizing dynamic, as Sander Gilman, Patricia Hill Collins, and Bordo document. Bartmann was exhibited in a cage and at fashionable parties in London and Paris in the Eighteenth Century as a scientific specimen, an illustration of the supposedly hypersexual black female. According to Gilman, the aspect of Bartmann that the Victorians found most titillating was her protruding rear end, which they associated with excessive sexuality. While these scholars focus solely on African American women in their discussion of this historical sexualized representation, Latinas were and are at times represented in a similar, if less extreme fashion.

In addition, scholarship confirms that while these preoccupations have become less extreme, that they still drive the construction of non-white female imagery in U.S. popular culture. As Bogle documents in his work on African American female stars since the 1920s, the presentation of sexuality has continued to be central in such constructions, while also tempered in a manner to make such performers palatable for white audiences and politically correct with respect to the mores of a particular era (*Brown Sugar*).

This scholarship on the social construction and power of bodily representation provides a foundation for the next area of theoretical exploration, that of beauty. This subject is still in the early stages of scholarly inquiry, arguably because notions of beauty are such a pervasive element of popular culture that they often are not considered worthy of serious study. In the words of



Anthony Synnott, the dynamics of beauty norms and their impact on individuals are “so taken-for-granted as to be invisible” (75). A number of scholars in the realms of cultural studies and media studies are beginning to take up this work, however. These scholars include Kathy Peiss, Lois Banner, Kathy Davis, and Elizabeth Haiken on the evolution of American beauty ideals and the commodification of beauty practices and products, Sarah Banet-Weiser on beauty pageants, and Sarah Berry, Susan Bordo, and Rebecca Epstein on beauty ideals as perpetuated in Hollywood films and popular culture. The subject of Latina beauty has yet to be explored in a sustained and critical fashion, however, having only been touched upon superficially by scholars of Latina stardom. Through building upon previous, related scholarship, it is possible to begin to theorize Latina beauty, however, an endeavor which I undertake here.

As scholars such as Peiss and Banner stipulate, the commodification of beauty products and practices in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century both united women of differing ethnicities and social backgrounds and served to reify class and racial divisions. Latinas were often positioned ambiguously with respect to these industrial and social developments, underscoring the complicated negotiations that historically have been necessary in the construction of Latina representation and particularly stardom in the U.S.

Peiss in particular documents how tropes of ethnic difference and exoticism were utilized to sell cosmetics as a practice to middle-class women of diverse ethnic backgrounds when the industry was becoming established in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “By exploiting the tension between the appearance of Anglo-Saxon gentility and foreign exoticism, advertisers could appeal to women of different class and ethnic backgrounds, while at the same time, creating a conception of beauty which drove a wedge between them” (Davis 40). Latinas arguably were positioned in an uneasy limbo between whiteness (the

realm of beauty) and non-whiteness (within this rubric, a realm of invisibility) in this marketing and interpellation.

In addition, a number of scholars examine the ideological and aesthetic connections between beauty ideals and notions of nationhood, questions that are useful to explore with respect to the impact of evolving beauty norms on Latina stardom. As scholars such as Banet-Weiser, Peiss, and Mizejewski have documented, beauty and body ideals reflect the racialized social hierarchy, as well as the values and notions of femininity of the dominant group of a locale, whether it be a town, a nation, or the world (with respect to the increasing globalization of media and thus to some extent global beauty ideals). As Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk and Beverly Stoeltje assert in their discussion of beauty pageants, contests that determine the “most beautiful” in a region “showcase values, concepts, and behavior that exist at the center of a group’s sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender, and place” (2). As previously stated, these standards have historically developed as a component of racialized social hierarchies. This in mind, a nation’s star system also arguably serves as a perpetual, national beauty pageant in its promotion of actors deemed to have the most potential aesthetic appeal to the widest cross-section of moviegoers. This is increasingly true as the aesthetic appeal of stars has come to be their most important currency in the spectacle-focused realm of millennial media celebrity.

Regardless of how beauty and body standards are perpetuated, they have a strong impact on individuals. Given that the typical Latina has a body type and look that is vastly different from that of the average fashion model, many Latinas likely have more than their share of struggles related to such norms. This assertion goes beyond what may initially seem to be an over-sentimentalized position: For Latinas and other women of color, American ideals of beauty can have a real impact on their day-to-day lives and livelihood, for with cultural ideals of appearance and particularly of “beauty,” come practical associations with

social status and power. As scholars such as Dyer (*White*), Bordo, and Wendy Chapkis assert, social status, intelligence, and even goodness are most often associated with individuals deemed beautiful and/or attractive in contemporary media representations, while oppression and negative traits tend to be associated with an appearance deemed unattractive. It is not only a question of psychology or self-esteem; individuals deemed beautiful by societal standards have been found to receive economic and social payoffs as well, what Anthony Synnott refers to as a “halo effect” associated with sanctioned beauty norms (74).<sup>18</sup> To name just one benefit that has been well documented by researchers, “[r]epeated studies find ... that American men and women who approximate the Western cultural ideal earn significantly higher wages than those who do not” (Cohen and Wilk with Stoeltje 6).

The female beauty norms of Western popular culture in this manner subtly celebrate such attributes as “eternal youth ... slender but voluptuous shapes... and most of all, an appearance in keeping with the conventions of upper-class, Western femininity” (Davis 50). Perhaps most notable among these ideals, whiteness additionally is elevated in the hierarchy of beauty ideals, as Dyer and others argue (*White*). The idealized white beauty is embodied in one, vivid illustration: blond haired, blue-eyed, slim-hipped, impossibly built Barbie™, who still dominates the pre-adolescent girl toy market. In another example among many, bell hooks has documented how women of color, wishing to improve their appearance, often modify their looks as best they can to more closely approximate a white beauty ideal.

It is useful, as well, to consider the role that Hollywood stars play in

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<sup>18</sup> Synnott makes reference to a number of sociological and psychological studies that have documented the social and economic benefits of beauty in *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*. See also *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, eds. Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wlk, and Beverly Stoeltje, for further discussion of the associations attributed to individuals deemed beautiful in a society.

reinforcing these ideals. To begin this exploration, I return to the star studies literature and scholars such as Dyer who argue that stars, as highly symbolic and powerful role models, teach what is beautiful, and in the case of women, feminine, in a particular era (*Heavenly*). Top stars thus often serve as era-specific role models of beauty, particularly for young people, as Alfred Appel, Jr. asserts.

Note how the girls are smiling in their sepia-tinted graduation photos, row upon row of little windows into the future—bravely smiling, it seems now, giving the limitations of their cosmetic impersonations of popular movie stars, each yearbook a mirror of prevailing standards of beauty, and possibly, of “life-styles,” too: class of 1944, Veronica Lake and Betty Grable; 1950, Jane Russell; 1955, Marilyn Monroe; 1960, Kim Novak; 1968 Faye Dunaway and Janis Joplin (the cinema’s influence is fading fast); and 1978, Farrah Fawcett and Mick Jagger (36).

As this list of stars as beauty “life-style” models and the literature surveyed earlier on Latina stardom suggests, Hollywood beauty and body ideals have traditionally been skewed toward an Anglo-Saxon appearance. Although these norms appear under challenge through the contemporary presence of non-white stars and fashion models, they exist in entertainment and fashion industries that continue to privilege white, upper-class standards of beauty. As Chapkis puts it, “It is ‘Charlie’s Angels’ [the 1976-1981 television series]... who appear to have a good time in the world, not women who are fat or small or dark-skinned” (37). These beauty standards are buttressed not only in the Hollywood star system but also through such diverse products of popular culture as fashion magazines, beauty contests, and children's toys.

This in mind, when non-white women have found a level of success in film, they often have been coded in contrast and as inferior to the white ideal. It is through such constructions that a system of imagined categories of gendered race and ethnicity has been maintained in Hollywood. Moreover, the hegemonic ideal of female Hollywood beauty has become taller, thinner, and more muscular in the last decades. Scholars such as Bordo and Rebecca Epstein are beginning to

document and theorize this new ideal for what Bordo terms the “slender body” in American popular culture. According to Bordo, building on Michel Foucault’s work on the “docile body,” such bodies are currently associated in American culture with the qualities of discipline, self-control, and success, while fat, and even female curves, have connotations of powerlessness, both actual and perceived, and lack of self-control. Female actors and other performers now generally must achieve and maintain such a lean, controlled body in order to be considered for talent representation and for casting in lead roles and other high profile positions in film and television.

Epstein additionally considers these dynamics with respect to star images, pointing to the rise in exercise culture since the 1980s as key to this development of increased focus on chiseled celebrity bodies. “[T]he star’s physical body has become the object for mass display and emulation as once were the costumes that adorned it,” Epstein points out. “The personal costume designer has given way to the personal trainer, the creator of costume that suggested the body replaced by a sculptor of the real thing” (191).

Within this new paradigm, fitness trainers, and plastic surgeons who serve the same purpose, in fact are perhaps the most important component in the construction of a star’s perceived beauty. For aesthetic appeal has become an increasingly vital component of the “symbolic capital” for individual star personae today (Bourdieu 179). Pierre Bourdieu describes symbolic capital as an individual’s show of wealth, power, or profit-driving potential, which results in receiving “credit,” power, or status in return (181). To extend his usage of the term, such symbolic capital is what film actors arguably receive through the display of star bodies deemed potentially appealing to a mass audience and as mentioned previously, adequately videogenic. Given this rising new standard, it is important to consider the status of Latino and Latina actors, who will often

have shorter, curvier bodies than their Anglo counterparts. How does the new Hollywood body impact on Latino representation and stardoms?

In the most contemporary context, such “investments” on the part of performers are often enhanced through a combination of expensive grooming, medical alterations (plastic surgery, dental work, and the like), and physical training. It is important to consider in this context exactly who can afford to achieve the new Hollywood body, and how the element of expense shifts the playing field with respect to the competition among acting hopefuls.

This class-related dimension of contemporary beauty and body ideals is just beginning to be explored in scholarship. The critical commentary of scholars on public reception to U.S. ice skaters Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan during the Lillehammer Olympics in 1994 underscores how class-related associations are in fact intricately intertwined with contemporary notions of “feminine” bodies. Several scholars, including Robyn Weigman and Lynda Zwinger, Abigail M. Feder, and Sam Stoloff assert that Harding was generally constructed as less feminine and as lower-classed “white trash” in comparison with Kerrigan, with these notions in particular ascribed on Harding’s shorter and stockier body and muscular thighs. As Weigman and Zwinger state:

[t]his melodrama parsed the transgressive hybridity of unnarrativized representative bodies back into recognizable heterovisual codes. The individual bodies, in other words, have been put in their places: the long lanky body of Nancy Kerrigan has been figured as feminine (read: elegant, innocent, wounded, virginal); the body with hips, thighs, and muscles as female (read: lower-classed, sexualized, powerful, bad). Virtually all the infotainment products emphasize this split, which is itself an artifact of the heterovisual apparatus. (Long lanky Nancy is, in real life, for instance, a mere five feet four inches). (118).

Stoloff similarly argues that “Tonya’s apparent density, in opposition with Nancy’s slenderness, evoked carnality, and especially a sense of bodily excess, or lack of bodily discipline” (227). These comments are useful to consider as well

with respect to constructions of excessive Latina bodies, and in particular Latina star bodies.

This is not to say that there aren't alternative notions of beauty and the body that bear on the construction of and reception to Latina stardom, however. Heavier bodies are acceptable and even considered desirable within traditional Latino cultures in the U.S., as is posited by Emily Bradley Massara. The non-skinny Latina body in such contexts has connotations of a woman who is happy, at peace with herself, and connected to family and community. Non-white women in the U.S. also often use makeup differently than Anglo American women, as sociologist Natalie Beausoleil found when she interviewed women of color in Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Latinas in particular indicated that they embraced visible makeup as a part of their ethnic identity, though they were well aware of Anglo-centric standards that dictated the social advantages of a more natural makeup look. Given that mainstream Hollywood star construction traditionally has and still tends to cater primarily to white audiences, the case studies I examine will primarily consider the dominant perspective of white American beauty and body ideals, however.

In addition, even Hollywood beauty standards arguably are beginning to shift. The last few decades have seen the rise of non-white women as stars and fashion models, which arguably has reflected and entailed an incremental broadening of beauty ideals. In 1970, the first African American woman, Cheryl Browne of Iowa, competed in the Miss America beauty pageant, while African Americans broke into the world of fashion modeling in the 1970s as well. The 1980s brought further achievements: Vanessa Williams was the first African American (or rather, biracial) woman to be crowned Miss America in 1983, while Talisa Soto became the first Latina among the ranks of top models in the 1980s. In the early 1990s both Revlon and Cover Girl signed the first non-white models, Veronica Webb and Lana Ogilve respectively, to exclusive contracts. Latinas

such as Daisy Fuentes, of Cuban descent, and Puerto Rican model Anna Marie Kortright Martinez also began appearing in American magazine advertising in the 1990s. Magazines such as *Latina* now routinely use models of Latin descent in their fashion spreads.

Moreover, there now are a number of non-white female stars who are changing the look of the Hollywood star system. Cicely Tyson, Whoopie Goldberg, Angela Bassett, Mercedes Ruehl, Julie Carmen, Rosie Perez, Salma Hayek, and Lucy Liu are just a few of the non-white actresses who have made a name for themselves in film in the last few decades.

The trend with respect to women of color whose images appear in film and other media texts continues to favor lighter skin and close approximation to European features, however. Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, for example, found this to be the case in their study of African American representation in the U.S. media. Entman and Rojecki concluded that more than a majority of the African American actors who appeared in TV advertising were light-skinned, likely in a proportion far higher than they actually exist in the U.S. population. A survey of the successful African American actresses today also finds that many are of half-white descent and thus arguably have light skin and a close approximation to Caucasoid features. Such actresses include Halle Barry, Vanessa Williams, Michael Michelle, and former *Cosby Show* actress Lisa Bonet. This also is often the case for Latinas. Salma Hayek is of half-Lebanese descent, while a number of successful new actresses on the scene, including Rosario Dawson (who appeared in *Kids* [1995] and *Josie and the Pussycats* [2001]), Jordana Brewster (*The Faculty* [1998] and *The Fast and the Furious* [2001]), and Jessica Alba (star of the television series *Dark Angel*, [2000+]) are of partial Latino descent, though often publicized as Latinas. At another extreme with respect to appearance, Cameron Diaz is generally coded as "white" within this rubric because of her blond hair and extremely fair skin, as well as lack of accent.



Not coincidentally, Diaz has experienced the most success of all of the Latinas mentioned here with respect to the roles she has been cast in and the salary she currently can command.

This long-standing trend toward lightness has taken on new forms in the last decade, as an “idealized mestizo standard of beauty” has gained a niche in 1990s marketing and popular culture (Halter 182). This ideal is particularly evident in contemporary advertising for Hispanic and mainstream audiences. As Arlene Dávila documents, a desire to appeal simultaneously to Latino and non-Latino markets has resulted in the trend toward the exclusive use of Latinos with a particular look. As Dávila describes, this new Latin Look includes straight hair and skin that is not too dark and not too light, as one casting director stated, “just enough oliveness to the skin to make [Latin models] not ambiguous” (110). Latinas whose skin is particularly dark *or* light thus can find themselves with fewer opportunities in the contemporary mediascape.

Elizabeth Halter, in her discussion of trends in general market advertising, also describes a new aesthetic ideal for light-skinned Latina and other ethnically indeterminate models, a look which she terms the New Mestiza ideal. Ethnic ambiguity in fact is emphasized in this aesthetic, which aims to appeal to a broad cross-section of the American public and particularly young people. In illustration, Halter quotes a representative of Sebastian, a company that sells hair care products, who pointed out an ethnically ambiguous model used in their most recent advertising. “She’s a mix of Yugoslavian and, I think, Asian. ... You know, it isn’t a black and white world anymore—and Sebastian wants to be more responsive to the multiethnic range of its customers” (172). Halter adds in regard to the new beauty ideal:

Neither the classic blue-eyed blonde nor the African queen are gracing the covers of fashion magazines. Instead, the idealized beauty standard is somewhere in between, a *mélange* of off-white features and khaki tones in a two-way process in which the black-female ideal lighted up from the

1970s Afrocentric period at the same time that the archetypical white woman was darkening, if only slightly, to a more mestizo presentation. Once black supermodels were on board, fashion magazines and cosmetic companies quickly began featuring Latina, Eurasian and other mixed-race faces (178).

While I don't fully share Halter's enthusiasm that American beauty standards are darkening, I do agree that there is currently an opening within contemporary popular culture and advertising for an alternative, if not parallel, beauty standard that embraces the look of the light-skinned Latina. Given these trends, some Latinas are finding doors opened to them in Hollywood that previously had been impenetrable. This new aesthetic will be discussed further in Chapter 4 in my exploration of the contemporary climate toward Latina stars.

#### **LATINO STARS TODAY: THE CROSSOVER CONUNDRUM**

Within this current political environment, borders become embedded with symbolic meaning about national sovereignty, a desired clarity about who “belongs” and who doesn’t, and employment security (Margaret Montoya 639).

A discussion of contemporary Latino stardom also must necessarily examine the term “crossover” that has been bandied about so much of late. More than any other ethnic group, Latinos have been packaged and sold to audiences under this label quite effectively over the last decade. Such marketing campaigns appear to ensure that Latinos who “cross over,” rather than slip through as non-Latino or ethnically ambiguous, may never achieve more than liminal status within the Hollywood star system and broader popular culture, however.

Because of its lack of popularity among Latinos working in the entertainment industries, as well as ultimate disagreement regarding the definition of the term, I do not wish to promote its use within the industry or within academic circles. I do feel it is important to sift through the various definitions

that exist for the term and examine its implications with respect to this project, however. This is particularly true because, despite its extensive usage in the entertainment industries today, crossover is a term and phenomenon that has not yet been the subject of critical scholarly inquiry. The very different perspectives on the term within the industry, regardless of whether the phenomenon it describes is purely construction or a reality, offer to illuminate some of the complicated dynamics of Latino stardom today.

In this section I discuss these contradicting and at times converging definitions and how the term came to be associated with Latino film production and actors. I next break the term down with respect to the various dimensions and methods that can be said to comprise the construction of a Latino or Latina "crossover." This is followed by an interrogation of various critiques of the crossover paradigm as one which requires performers to engage in a "whitening" process or to otherwise be contained in some manner. Finally, I consider crossover in relation to evolving ethnic demographics, which contribute to a growing cultural *mestizaje* (hybridity) in the U.S. and a growing contemporary interest in bicultural and multicultural entertainment texts and performers.

While crossover in its broadest definition refers to a performer or media text that gains a new audience, in popular usage the term has been used primarily to describe non-white performers and media texts that become popular with white audiences, and recently, Latino performers in particular. Notably, white performers are not similarly described as crossover stars with respect to their marketing and appeal to ethnic audiences; notably, it is assumed in the popular imagination that they already are of interest to viewers of various ethnic backgrounds. The term in its current usage in popular culture thus underscores an ongoing racial hegemony that is central to the national and global entertainment industries and continues to strongly influence the star system as we know it today.

According to scholars such as Reebee Garofalo and Steve Perry, the term originated in the music industry, used by marketing professionals in the 1950s and 1960s to refer to then-revolutionary rock 'n' roll musical acts. This entailed the selling of music with African American roots and by African American musical performers to white audiences. As such, it was initially an insider term used almost exclusively by music producers and promoters.

From these roots, crossover can additionally be understood as a promotional strategy. The term currently is often used in this manner to describe a type of marketing campaign. For instance, some media producers use the term as a type of "label of quality" or promise that their performers and/or media products can sell to both a particular niche and to mainstream markets. At times it has been used to sell a number of performers simultaneously, a type of marketing umbrella through which a number of media products and performers can be sold. Such was the case for Latino musical performers in 1998.

Crossover also can usefully be broken down with respect to the distinct elements that comprise a Latino/a star persona and related promotional campaign aiming to market that performer to a white audience, highlighting the cultural complexity of the phenomenon with respect to both non-white celebrity images and star discourses. There are multiple facets to the process through which a Latino or Latina performer might be groomed and marketed to "cross over" in U.S. popular culture, which I detail here and consider in relation to each of the following case studies of this dissertation. Subervi-Vélez's discussion of the elements typically involved in the process of cultural assimilation is useful to consider in mapping similar elements inherent in crossover promotional marketing ("Ethnic Assimilation and Pluralism"). Just as an immigrant's process of assimilation to a new culture often will involve engaging in changes in some, but perhaps not all of the categories of cultural expression—which, as Subervi-Vélez details, include dress, language, food, music, and religion—so constructing

and marketing crossover stars also involves deliberate work and choices regarding such elements of a star's image as dress, music, language, perceived personality type, and iconic motifs of *Latinidad*.

Elements that resonate with American-inflected tropes of empire arguably have proven to have particular selling appeal to the white American public, and thus factor heavily into “successful” crossover promotional campaigns. The success of particular performers in achieving appeal with non-Latino Americans also has been influenced by the physical appearance of the performer. Physical factors of a performer's physicality, including body type, facial features, skin color, and hair texture and style, must be considered when parsing crossover potential, as such phenotypic elements traditionally have had a strong impact. Cosmetic grooming and enhancement additionally can play a role in the construction of a crossover star, within the limitations of such techniques.

Such dynamics parallel the experience of African American female actors since the inception of film. Bogle, for example, highlights how skin color has been a determining factor in the making or breaking of African American crossover stars (*Brown*). Light-skinned African American actresses with a close approximation of European facial features (such as Diana Ross in the seventies) have traditionally had a chance at cross over into mainstream popular culture, while dark skinned women such as Cicely Tyson have experienced only limited promotion and opportunity, as Bogle documents. Similarly, Latinas with light skin and European features have long experienced crossover potential in Hollywood that *mestiza* Latinas have not.

Beyond these basic aesthetic requirements, various elements and tropes of *Latinidad* have generally been employed in the construction of Latino crossover stardom. For example, the selling of Ricky Martin as a crossover phenomenon in 1998 involved an emphasis on his “Latino” body and Latin dance and music (the categories of “body type” and “music”), as well as allusions to earlier Latin

Lovers, the tropicalist motifs of heat and passion, and the Spanish language. It did not extend, however, to marketing Martin to non-Latino audiences with respect to substantial information regarding Latino communities in the U.S.

The first usages of the term "crossover" to describe Latino actors and Latino-oriented films that I found in my research were in the late 1980s, when a number of news stories trumpeted the success of such films as *La Bamba* (1987) and *Stand and Deliver* (1988), and heralded, if in an ambiguous manner, the entrance of Latino filmmakers and stars in Hollywood. Labeling the 1980s the "Decade of the Hispanic," media outlets such as *Time* magazine declared, for instance, "[A]s they cross over into the American imagination, Latinos are sending one irresistible message: we come bearing gifts" (Lacayo 49). Since that time the popular usage of the term has increased, reaching a peak during the news coverage of the more recent "Latin Wave" of 1998-1999.

It should be pointed out that despite the presumably positive connotations of crossover stardom, "crossover" is a term disliked and deliberately avoided by most Latinos working both behind and in front of the camera in the film and related entertainment industries today. In the various interviews that I conducted with Latinos in the film industry, almost all subscribed to the sentiment that describing Latinos as crossover stars only emphasizes barriers to access and success, reinforcing notions of Latinos as somehow un-American or outside the mainstream with respect to their talent and star potential.

The term also raises questions of potential compromise on the part of non-white performers in order to appeal to white audiences, of "selling out" or "passing" in order to achieve success. Does crossover phenotypically, linguistically, and/or culturally necessarily involve an inherent whitening process? As Perry summarizes what he terms the "anticrossover criticism" of black musicians who become popular with white audiences, the "most persistent theme... is the neo-folkie notion that crossing over to pop success is inherently

dangerous to a black artist's integrity, as well as the 'authenticity' of his or her music" (54). Perry's statement prompts the question, however: Authentic to whom?

The packaging and marketing of non-white stars in the U.S. does raise particular challenges for the performer in question, however. The process can be beset with obstacles and compromises, including "isolation and exclusion on the one hand, and incorporation and homogenization on the other" (Garofalo 279). These arguably are the obstacles and pitfalls faced by Latino performers today who are the recipients of similar "crossover"-inflected marketing.

While the phenomenon of crossover has scarcely begun to be explored in the literature with respect to this particular term, the dynamics of crossover has been explored in theoretical writing in regard to the reception of non-white celebrity by white audiences. Most broadly, media and cultural studies scholars note the skewed power relations at play in the general production and reception of media representations of people of color in the U.S. media. This reception is generally slanted with respect to a dominant "white gaze," a term extended by theorists such as Manthia Diawara and bell hooks from Laura Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze" to describe the impact of a presumed white audience in the creation of constructions of non-white ethnicity. With respect to my own project, this is evidenced in both the dearth of Latinos and other minorities working behind the scenes, and particularly in decision-making positions in the entertainment industries, as well as in the recurring demarcation of the Latina ethnic "Other" through patterns of ambivalent representation in mainstream popular culture.

More specifically with respect to stardom, a number of studies underscore that in past decades, non-white star images within such an Anglo-centric media system have tended to be constructed based on assumptions of a white public and ambivalent discourses of non-whiteness. For instance, in his analysis of Paul

Robeson, the most popular African American singer and actor from the 1920s through the 1940s with respect to reception by white audiences, Dyer discusses how Robeson's blackness had to be negotiated in his publicity in order for the actor-singer to establish and maintain an appeal with white audiences.

This was accomplished, Dyer asserts, through the inscription of white, stereotypical notions of "blackness" in Robeson's star discourse, which involved, among other things, an emphasis on fetishized notions of the black male body and Robeson's portrayal of African American heroes well known among the white mainstream, such as Othello (*Heavenly*). Through this inscription of white notions of blackness, the potentially transgressive element of race was "deactivated," according to Dyer (115). The work of Donald Kiriara on the star image of Japanese silent film actor Sessue Hayakawa reiterates Dyer's assertion that non-white star images, at least in the past, had to resonate with white notions of ethnicity in order for an actor to achieve success with white audiences. In the case of Hayakawa, this was accomplished through the deployment of a contradictory star discourse that attributed to the actor both positive and negative stereotypes then associated with Asian Americans.

Scholars such as Dyer and Kiriara thus point to the contradiction embedded in such images, what might be described as a simultaneous celebration and objectification of ethnic or racial difference, and to related questions of agency and commodification in their production and reception. An example would be the persistence of stereotypical markers of Latinidad in the star images of Rosie Perez and Carmen Miranda, as Valdivia and López ("Are There Latins") respectively document.

Other scholars address the problematic depletion of authentic ethnic elements in the construction of non-white stardom. As Perry summarizes the commentary of critics of crossover, "according to this line, black artists who cross over must take certain elements *out* of their music and their self-presentation in



order to make it palatable to white audiences” (54). These dynamics, the inclusion of elements that echo cultural stereotypes and/or omission of authentic elements in a whitening process, theoretically would nullify potentially transgressive (and thus powerful) aspects of difference in non-white star images. This phenomenon has been described alternately as containment, “deactivation,” as previously discussed (Dyer *Heavenly* 115), or recuperation (hooks). It can be extrapolated from this scholarship that for Latina stars, as well as for other people of color working in front of the camera, there is a fine line between success and exploitation that may only serve to reinforce notions of racial hegemony.

These dynamics, moreover, stand out in sharp relief when media are compared. Non-white celebrity representation appears, even upon superficial examination, to take on a different energy and dynamic process with respect to different mediums. For example, Jennifer Lopez apparently can be more “ethnic” in the realm of pop music than in the realm of film, emphasizing the constructedness of borders in various media landscapes in relation to assumptions about target audiences. It is important to be mindful of “the nature of the genre worked in and the power relations it sustains among artists, subjects, and audience” (Fusco 72).

While I agree with Dyer, Kirihaara, and hooks that non-white star images often include racially hegemonic elements that tend to reify the racialized hierarchy in this country, this interpretation is overly simplistic. First, as Perry argues, such a formulation assumes an impossibly “pure—and thus necessarily static” authentic ethnicity on the part of performers and whiteness on the part of audiences (54). Additionally, this perspective neglects to acknowledge the power that also is inherent to non-white star images. To put it more precisely, with respect to their paradoxical construction, the most successful Latina stars are often shaped in their representation in a manner that alternately (and often

simultaneously) contains and celebrates their gendered ethnic difference, with these opposing tendencies in constant tension.

As such, Latina and other non-white star representations also possess the potential to upset the primacy of whiteness in the Hollywood star system and national norms of beauty and the body. Non-white stardom, regardless of whether it is described as crossover stardom, in this manner can be an aesthetic, industrial, and ideological challenge to the status quo. Such “subversive” ethnic images in the arena of Hollywood-driven media as a Mexican protagonist in the previously lily-white field of action heroes, such as director Robert Rodriguez created in the casting of Carlos Gallardo in *El Mariachi*, and Jennifer Lopez proudly displaying her short and shapely “Latina” body to talk show audiences in 1998, can signal openings for change in the representational primacy of whiteness as positive, whiteness as intelligence, and whiteness as beauty in American film representation.

I find equally useful to understanding the complexity of Latina stardom the scholarship which views these phenomena as mediating tension and ambivalence over questions of social power and national identity in this country. As Coco Fusco asserts, one function of contradictory representations of cultural difference in a society is to express questions of identity as a culture’s borders shift and change. From this perspective, non-white star images can be seen as giving voice to the schisms of American confusion around identity as ethnic demographics and popular culture are undergoing incremental and at times dramatic shifts, particularly in regard to the rapidly growing Latino population.

Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, in his study of Latino participation and representation in American theater, describes this ongoing social tension with respect to Latino performers and culture (*José*). He calls attention to a cultural tug-of-war in the U.S. between opposing impulses, that of superficial commodification/appropriation of aspects of Latino culture, which he terms

“Latinization,” and “Latinidad,” which is produced through Latino agency and participation in the production of popular culture and can result in increasingly hybrid cultural forms (15). While I find these terms somewhat imprecise with respect to the phenomena they describe, the metaphor of tension rings true with respect to contemporary popular culture. While salsa overtakes ketchup as the nation’s most popular condiment and Jennifer Lopez has become one of the most heavily promoted U.S. stars, the uneasy balance between Latinization and Latinidad as described by Sandoval-Sánchez is increasingly evident. This tension—between commodification and agency, exclusion and changing notions of American culture—has been and continues to be constantly in dynamic question in Hollywood film and American popular culture with respect to Latina stardom, as the case studies of Dolores Del Rio, Rita Moreno, and Jennifer Lopez will illustrate.

Another important factor to consider with respect to understanding the complexities of crossover stardom is that of changing ethnic demographics in the U.S. The growing Latino, bicultural, and broader non-white populations arguably are influencing changes in the American imaginary that are beginning to be reflected in popular culture; “crossover” stars from this perspective can be seen as a natural outgrowth of these shifts. As mentioned previously, Latinos now comprise more than 12 percent of the population, slightly more than the proportion of African Americans, as compared to only 5.6 percent in 1940 (U.S. Census 1940, U.S. Census 2000). Meanwhile, non-whites as a whole now comprise approximately 30 percent of the total population. The numbers of mixed-race families and individuals in the U.S., particularly with respect to young people, also are on the rise.<sup>19</sup> Census statistics indicate that the number of mixed-

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<sup>19</sup> In the 2000 census, individuals were given the option of choosing two or more races for the first time. 6.8 million, or 2.4 percent of all respondees, indicated that they belong to two or more races. U.S. Census Bureau. *The Two or More Races Population: 2000*. Census Bureau Brief, Nov. 2001. Avail. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-6.pdf>. Given that many mixed-race

race children has boomed in this country, to over 1.9 million in 1990 (Halter 170).

Moreover, as Halter asserts, a “postmodern ethnic revival” has been taking place in the U.S. and strongly influencing popular culture (83). This revival is due in part to the increasing ethnic diversity in the U.S., as well as the cultural renaissance that was experienced alongside the civil rights and counterculture movements of the 1960s and ‘70s. This trend is particularly being felt with respect to the increasing appeal of ethnic-inflected products and practices in the U.S. Given this growth of cultural *mestizaje* in the U.S., at least on the level of consumption, it perhaps comes as no surprise that young people of all ethnic backgrounds in U.S. are demonstrating in their media habits a greater interest in performers of diverse ethnic backgrounds than do older white Americans.<sup>20</sup>

From this perspective, successful crossover stars arguably are those that embody these bicultural and multicultural trends with respect to their look, ethnic or personal background, and/or performance style. As Robert Stam asserts, “‘cultural mulattoes’ ... are at the cutting edge of American pop culture” (352). Singers Mariah Carey and Ricky Martin, golf professional Tiger Woods, and actors such as Vin Diesel, Keanu Reeves, Will Smith, Halle Barry, and Jennifer Lopez all could be said to personify this trend.<sup>21</sup> As Christy Haubegger, the publisher of *Latina* magazine, has noted with respect to the careers of Martin and Lopez:

Haven’t Jennifer Lopez and Ricky Martin embodied the future of American in some ways? These bilingual, bicultural kids, isn’t that

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individuals choose to identify by one ethnic or racial signifier, it also can be assumed that this figure drastically undercounts the numbers of mixed-race people currently in the U.S.

<sup>20</sup> Recent research, including annual studies of television viewing by the advertising conglomerate BBDO New York, has found that young people ages 18-24 are more likely to watch television programs starring actors of ethnicities different from their own in comparison to older viewers. “TV Viewing Habits,” *Minority Markets Alert*.

<sup>21</sup> Each of these individuals (with the exception of Smith, Martin, and Lopez) is reported to be of biracial or multicultural ethnic heritage. Smith, Martin, and Lopez, on the other hand, could be said to embody contemporary *mestizaje* through their comfort in both white and non-white culture and their successful transitions from one entertainment “culture” to another.

America? They are amalgams of all kinds of ethnic influences. They are mirrors. I'm not sure if they are projecting or reflecting, maybe both (qtd. in Garcia, B1-B2).

Notably, however, only Lopez and Martin, the Latino performers in this group, appear to consistently be *labeled* as crossover stars, highlighting the particular connection made in the U.S. English-language media between crossover and Latinidad. This phenomenon is important to continue to explore in critical scholarship.

It's useful, in particular, to consider recent anti-immigration rhetoric centered on the U.S.-Mexico border when interpreting the significance of this labeling of Latino performers as crossovers. As Fusco asserts, anti-immigration rhetoric can be interpreted as a backlash response to the growing number of Latinos in the U.S., "a symptom of the fear that the Southwest might become part of Mexico, as it once was" (65). Such anti-Latino discourse has increased in the last few decades, as Linda Bosniak and Kevin R. Johnson have documented, the sociopolitical backdrop in which crossover stardom has been established as a particularly Latino phenomenon. Within the realm of the entertainment industries, the continuing inscription of social borders, imaginary or not, can be viewed as a theater through which wider social issues are being played out—in this case, ultimately serving to label Latinos as perpetual Hollywood outsiders who ultimately will not crowd out Anglo stars from their "rightful" palce.

What deserves closer scrutiny, moreover, is the still entrenched notion among many film executives that the mainstream media audience is "white." Consideration of this phenomenon in light of the increasing creolization of the contemporary U.S. begs the question, what are crossovers really crossing over *to*? Undoubtedly racialized borders are emphasized in such a construction of stardom, whether they exist in real life or not.

## METHODOLOGY

Previous academic studies of star images have tended to focus on textual analyses of stars' film roles, and less often, publicity texts. Through examinations of star texts from a semiotic or sociological perspective, such scholarship generally has emphasized the ideological function that stars serve in society. While I take up such a methodological approach in my own study, in this project I emphasize the strategic *construction* of Latina star images through primary analysis of star publicity texts and when possible, information regarding their production and dissemination.

As Dyer points out, star images involve the collaborative efforts of many people and multiple media industries (*Heavenly*). This is not a new phenomenon, and in fact harkens back to before the solidification of the studio system, but it is one that appears to have become increasingly intense. Given the astronomical cost of producing and marketing even an average budget film today,<sup>22</sup> the choice to promote a particular actor or actress now involves millions of dollars and large teams of people. Star publicity also is often extremely strategic, involving meticulously planned and carefully executed promotional efforts. These days the work and choices of production companies and distribution studios, and of a star's personal team of "handlers"—at a bare minimum, consisting of an agent and manager, a publicist, and hair, makeup and fashion stylists—as well as film critics and entertainment reporters all play a role in star construction, as I highlight with this methodological approach.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This figure reached \$76 million in 1998. See Leonard Klady, "Budgets in the Hot Zone: The Sum also Rises."

<sup>23</sup> These requisite star body beautifiers and their predecessors of prior decades highlight the importance of stars as icons of beauty and body norms in the nation and globally through the export of films and other media. This phenomenon will be addressed in more detail in a later section of this chapter and in each of the case studies, Chapters 2 through 4, with respect to the individual stars and eras under study.

To come to an understanding of the ideological discourses attached to a star, the unique sociohistorical, political, and industrial climate in which the star text exists at a particular juncture is also vital to explore, as Dyer argues and many scholars since have demonstrated (*Heavenly*). Thus I draw on the works of Shohat (“Ethnicities”) and López (“Are There Latinos”) in designing my study as an analysis of “ethnicities-in-relation.” As Shohat points out, such a research model conceptualizes ethnicity always within the context of its construction within a particular media text and the broader social climate (217). My aim is to situate the analysis in each case study within an understanding of the social and industrial history and climate in which these activities of star image production were embedded.

In particular, I examine the individual and industrial choices and structures that have had an impact on opportunities for Latinos in the industry and on Latina stardom in particular. Social attitudes, power and agency are best illuminated through such a focus on the work, money, and choices that together pull the strings of Latina stardom. My research in this respect is motivated by a desire to remove the “smoke and mirrors” from the sociohistorical, industrial, and individual processes that comprise the work of Latina star construction and promotion as a means to illuminate and question those practices and choices.

In order to explore Latina stardom vis-à-vis such historical and industrial contexts, I took a historical case study approach in my research. In choosing the stars for the three case studies, I considered the factors of gender, phenotype, nationality, and level of success achieved in Hollywood. The decision to focus exclusively on female actors in this study was made for a number of reasons previously alluded to. Latinos and Latinas have experienced stardom in drastically different ways, as they have been and continue to be given differing opportunities in Hollywood film (as has been the case for men and women of all ethnicities), particularly with respect to casting. As has been explored by film scholars such

as David Bordwell, Claire Johnston, and Laura Mulvey, “classical” Hollywood film has traditionally privileged male-centric narratives, often marginalizing females in less dimensional roles as “the girlfriend” or “the damsel in distress.”<sup>24</sup> As Johnston argued in 1973, “it is probably true to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent” (214). Actresses of all ethnicities in this manner have generally been limited by fewer casting opportunities and opportunities mainly in underdeveloped roles in which their function is often to serve as an object of romance and/or sexual desire. In contrast, male actors have often been privileged with respect to opportunities to be cast in action-adventure films, a broad genre category which has been consistently popular. Latino actors, even those deemed more of the “character actor” type than the “romantic hero” type, have benefit from the variety of roles available for men within this category, while Latinas have not experienced this same boon of potential roles.

There have been exceptions to this pattern. For example, complex female characters are prominent in the “women’s films” of the studio era and in noir films of the 1940s and 1950s. Given the traditional gender roles in Hollywood film, however, female star construction can be expected to take on a more highly sexualized tone than that of their male counterparts. When female characters are Latina or played by Latina actresses, this sexualization is arguably even more likely, as previously described. Scholars who have documented Latina representation in Hollywood film and American popular culture such as Pettit, Berg (“Stereotyping”), and Cortés highlight this tendency within Hollywood film. These gendered distinctions in mind, I have chosen to sharpen my analytical focus by confining this study to the careers and star images of Latinas.

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<sup>24</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. Claire Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema.” Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”



Additionally, I restricted my analyses to Latinas who were/are phenotypically not of conventional Anglo appearance, in order to best explore the status of Latinas with respect to evolving beauty norms in the U.S. This entailed confining the case studies to dark-eyed, brunette Latinas. Such Latinas as Cameron Diaz and Daisy Fuentes thus were not considered as potential case studies. Further research could usefully explore the diversity of Latin looks through in-depth case study of such stars, however. In addition, the decision was made to include both Mexican and Puerto Rican stars among the case studies in order to carry out a quasi-historical survey of Latina stardom over the decades. This is not to deny that there are differences between Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, in regard to Hollywood film representation and otherwise. For the purpose of this study, however, the conflation of Latino nationalities in film representation, as described by scholars such as Cortés and Sandoval-Sánchez (*José*), is important to explore. Including both Mexican and Puerto Rican stars allows for particular study of that conflation.

Finally, through reviews of Hollywood film history and star history texts and scholarship on Latino stardom, I determined which Latina stars in various eras have achieved the most success, as defined by top billing, profitable box office earnings, promotional dominance in film posters, studio contracts, and other evidence of status and popularity. The actresses' filmographies and publicity also were surveyed to learn the number and types of films in which they were cast and the general amount and type of promotional effort put out by their studios, production companies, and/or talent agencies in relation to their careers. Ultimately, Dolores Del Rio, Rita Moreno, and Jennifer Lopez were chosen. As will be discussed further in the following chapters, aside from meeting the previously mentioned criteria, each of these women represents the peak of stardom attainable for a Latina during their respective era.

After these decisions were made, a number of general research challenges were raised by the topic of Latina stardom. The creation and maintenance of stardom, as a multifarious phenomenon that includes the production of star publicity texts, ongoing “performance” of stardom by the celebrity in question, and critical and audience response, can be difficult to reconstruct and study.<sup>25</sup> As Joshua Gamson indicates in his exploration of the dynamics of contemporary celebrity, this is an area of research that thus falls within the realms of both institutional and interpretive analysis, making it difficult to research adequately through a singular methodological approach. For this reason, I combine a number of methodological approaches in my analysis for each of the three case studies, including historiography and industrial analysis of the historical period that each star was situated in as well as textual analysis of each star’s films and star publicity texts. To gather further data for my contemporary case study, I also conducted interviews with professionals working in the film and talent management industries and engaged in participant observation work related to Latino star promotion activities in Los Angeles, with much of this work made possible through interning at the trade journal *Latin Heat* in the summer of 2000.

With respect to source material, my research entailed analysis of film and star publicity materials such as exhibitors’ press books, film posters, studio-produced biographies, and publicity stills, and such materials as magazine articles and film reviews related to the stars and their respective films, as well as the stars’ films themselves when available. In this process, reviews in *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* were emphasized. Given these trade journals’ close relationship to film studios, coverage of stars in these journals promised to shed particular light on the promotional spin that studios wished to attach to particular stars.

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<sup>25</sup> Performance in this usage refers to the actor’s performance of self in public in accordance with his or her star image. Barry King addresses this phenomenon in “Articulating Stardom.”

Like many of Del Rio's silent films and Moreno's B-films of the 1950s, these materials often have not been preserved in an organized fashion. As Ríos-Bustamente laments, films and related production and publicity materials with respect to Latino stars often have not been recognized as important to archive and preserve. This material thus was gleaned from a number of separate archives, including the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin, and the Film Archive of the Historical Society of the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The archival materials at the Margaret Herrick Library were particularly important to this work; biographical files containing magazine and newspaper clipping and publicity photographs of each star and production files on almost all of the Del Rio and Moreno films provided the majority of my primary research material. Early publicity stills of Del Rio and Moreno also were located at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin. Due to copyright complications, only a few will be reprinted in this dissertation, however. Relevant films were examined whenever possible; several rare Del Rio films and Moreno films were viewed through the Film and Television Archive of UCLA.

Additionally, the Jennifer Lopez star image in particular has been in a state of continuous evolution throughout the writing of this research project. As is the case for all major contemporary stars, Lopez-related star discourse circulates in countless popular media texts that focus on celebrities, which run the gamut from film fan and general interest magazines to Internet sites to television talk shows and news programs. Unfortunately, some of these media moments are fleeting. Given the lack of archival preservation of entertainment news programs and television talk show content at this time, much of Lopez's publicity, for example, brief mentions or appearances on *Entertainment Tonight* or *Jay Leno*, was difficult to capture for study. For this reason, I relied heavily on print media

texts and some archived television transcripts (CNN transcripts, for example, are currently archived in this manner) for the purposes of this particular case study. In addition to research at the aforementioned archives, many of the articles covering Jennifer Lopez's career and related publicity photos analyzed as a part of this case study were found using such library indexes as LEXIS-NEXIS. Publicity photographs of Lopez that accompanied magazine articles or appeared on the covers of magazines were obtained with hard copies of magazine articles and from Jennifer Lopez-related Internet sites, as well as photographic image sites such as Corbis.com and Google.com's image library. Film-related information and posters related to the films of all three stars also were found through the Internet Movie Database (ImdB.com) and studio-produced websites in the case of contemporary films. Complete lists of the primary resources cited in each case study can be found in the bibliography of this dissertation, while filmographies of each actress comprise Appendices A through C.

Available film posters were analyzed for information regarding star promotion and the particular star's status in each of the case studies. In my analysis of film posters, I borrowed from the methodology utilized by Berg in his analysis of classic Mexican film posters to interpret the status of stars and other elements promoted in the posters.<sup>26</sup> Berg utilizes a "four quadrant approach" to determine the importance of the various elements in a film poster, which generally include star name or names, star image, film title, narrative information, and credits. This approach operates on the assumption that Western readers will generally "read" a poster "from left to right and top to bottom" (27). With this understanding, if a poster is divided into four equal rectangles or "quadrants," elements that appear in the top left quadrant have been given the most emphasis by a film company or distributor, followed by the elements that appear in the top

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<sup>26</sup> Rogelio Agrasánchez, Jr. and Charles Ramírez Berg, *Poster Art from the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema*.

right, then those that appear in the bottom left, and finally those in the bottom right quadrant. Through the analysis of promotional posters and other star publicity using this approach, the rise and fall of a star's status as perceived by a studio, production company, or distributor can be traced, as Berg demonstrates. This methodology proved extremely helpful to the analysis of how each star was promoted in relation to her films at various stages of her Hollywood career.

With respect to the analysis of publicity photographs, photos of stars in film posters, and other visual images, I benefited as well from the work of Erving Goffman. Goffman analyzed the inscription of fantasies of feminine ideals in the display of fashion models in advertising, what he termed the "hyper-ritualization" of gendered display (3). Such codes similarly structure the production of visual images of female stars and thus provide a model to consider in the analysis of publicity photographs included in the case studies. Borrowing this conceptualization from Goffman's work, my analyses include a focus on the interpretation of feminine gender display in the stars' publicity photographs, including attention to pose and other aspects of bodily display, dress, facial appearance and expression, backdrop/context, active or passive connotation, and other elements.

As previously mentioned, I also conducted several interviews with Latino professionals in the entertainment industries in order to gather background information for the contemporary case study. The majority of these interviews were conducted in Los Angeles in the summer of 2000. These professionals included a casting director, agent, publicist, producers, writers, and actors, some actively working, and others still struggling to establish a career. A listing of interviewees can be found in Appendix D. Interviews centered on industry attitudes toward and opportunities for Latino actors in contemporary film and their own experiences working in film and/or television. This information

informs the contemporary case study in Chapter 4 and the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

In 2000 and in early 2002, unsuccessful attempts were also made to contact and arrange interviews with Rita Moreno, Jennifer Lopez, and Lopez's personal manager, Benny Medina. I was not successful in arranging interviews, presumably due to the career demands that Moreno, Lopez, and Medina currently face. I instead relied heavily on published, videotaped, and audiotaped (radio) interviews with these individuals in a variety of media outlets.

An additional component of the methodology consisted of a period of participant observation fieldwork in Los Angeles for two months in the summer of 2000. This allowed me to gather "thick description" of the realities that contemporary Latino actors and stars face in today's film, television, and talent management industries (Geertz). As a part of this fieldwork, I served as an intern at *Latin Heat* trade magazine in Burbank. In the course of this work I had many conversations with the editor/publisher, Bel Hernandez, and the advertising manager, Sandy Varga, on their thoughts on Latino stardom in Hollywood, with respect to both the historical and contemporary situation. As a part of this internship I assisted in the creation of an on-line database of Latino actors meant for use by casting directors, edited news stories on Latino actors' upcoming projects, witnessed firsthand star promotion efforts at events such as a press screening for the then-new Showtime series *Resurrection Blvd.* (2000-Present), and was able to review a number of contemporary actors' media press kits. I also attended events held by the Nosotros actors' advocacy group in Los Angeles, and worked at their annual Golden Eagle Awards show. During this time, I had several informal conversations as well as a few formal interviews with Nosotros members about my project. This fieldwork provided a useful context for understanding the general social climate in which Latina and Latino actors currently work within the film and other entertainment industries.

To gain an understanding of the historical and industrial context for the time periods in question, research on U.S. and film history was also conducted on a broad basis. Film and Latino history texts and historical documents provided important background information regarding the social and political developments that influenced the status of and attitudes toward U.S. Latinos, particularly in Los Angeles, in various times periods.

The evolution of beauty and body ideals in the U.S. and the impact this evolution had on Latina actresses also was a subject of critical exploration. Due to a lack of academic focus on beauty as a topic of cultural study until quite recently, however, this research at times was difficult to undertake in a straightforward fashion. For this reason, information regarding ideals of appearance in the time periods in question was gleaned not only from academic sources but also from scattered popular culture sources such as movie fan magazines, fashion magazines, beauty pageant reviews, and commercial artifacts such as Barbie dolls.

## **OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS**

Latina star texts are highly symbolic, serving as totems upon and through which historical tropes and contemporary social tensions regarding Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. are both literally and figuratively inscribed. In the following chapters, I explore questions regarding stardom and social power, beauty and body ideals, and more specifically, racialized and gendered Latina star bodies that were worked through in three different eras in Hollywood film with respect to the careers of three Latina stars, Dolores Del Rio, Rita Moreno, and Jennifer Lopez.

In Chapter 2, “Dolores Del Rio in the Twenties and Thirties: The Shaping of Pre- and Post-Sound Latina Stardom,” I present the case study of Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio, whose career in Hollywood spanned the years of 1925-1943. From her first hit film in 1926, Del Rio became the late 1920s equivalent

of a present-day international superstar, albeit only in the few brief years before the transition to sound film. In this time period, Del Rio portrayed roles of passionate females of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, particularly European. After the transition to talkies, Dolores Del Rio, like other Latino actors, found her opportunities limited by the industry's desire to foreground "true" Americans in sound films, however.

In addition, a shift took place with respect to the promotion of Del Rio as a star body after the transition to sound film. While Del Rio had portrayed many body-emphasizing roles in the silent era, she also generally was an active subject and protagonist in these early characterizations. Her "Dark Lady" roles in Latin musicals and other talkies, on the other hand, while offering a modicum of dignity, nevertheless subtly undercut that dignity by positing her primarily as an ethnic object of the gaze and desire of white men. Even while Del Rio maintained an elegant and classy star image in her extratextual publicity, in her 1930s films, she became confined to roles as a peripheral Latina or ethnic female who possessed something extra "south of the equator." I argue in this chapter that Del Rio's something extra in fact was the historically constructed seductive and passionate Latina body hinted at beneath her untouchably ruffled and feathered dance costumes.

The delineation and sexualization of the Latina body and persona became a powerful Hollywood paradigm during the studio system era that persisted unabated in later decades, such that Puerto Rican actress Rita Moreno was to become all-too familiar with it as well. In Chapter 3, "Rita Moreno in the Fifties and Sixties: The Selling and Limitations of the Latina Star Body," I continue this historical overview with a case study of Moreno in the first two decades of the film career. As a Latina in Hollywood of the 1950s and 60s who could make no claims to a privileged upbringing or European ties, Moreno experienced many obstacles to being cast in star-making roles, among them the tendency during the



post-studio system era to cast Latina actresses as no more than secondary spitfire characters and temporary romantic interests. As Moreno's career trajectory illustrates, the breakdown of the studio system, corresponding rise of independent film production, and changing movie audiences prompted both new opportunities and new obstacles with respect to the patterns of Latina casting and star promotion that had become rote by the 1950s.

As I discuss in the chapter, Rita Moreno's rising stardom also was hampered by Hollywood's entrenched, tropicalist-tinged promotional efforts with respect to Latinas, through which Moreno was posited as a voluptuous, seductive body and passionate spitfire, even after Moreno's talent was officially recognized with an Oscar win in 1962 for *West Side Story*. As Moreno was often to complain, this paradigm consistently undercut acknowledgment of her acting abilities and thwarted her desire to be cast in more diverse and compelling protagonist roles. It was through sheer determination and talent that Moreno maintained an active career in these decades. Moreno was later to find greater opportunity in theater and television, eventually becoming one of only a small handful of performers ever to have won an Oscar, a Tony, a Grammy, *and* an Emmy. She continues to enjoy an active career today, most recently as part of the ensemble in the acclaimed HBO drama *Oz*.

Chapter 4, "Crossing Over (and Beyond) the Latina Body: Jennifer Lopez in Contemporary Hollywood," brings this study up to the present, focusing on Lopez's career from the early 1990s until the present day. Nuyorican (New York-born Puerto Rican) Lopez arguably is currently the most powerful Latina in Hollywood. A number of social and industrial developments helped create openings that gave Lopez and other Latino actors an entrée into the industry in the early 1990s, as I discuss in the chapter, including a rising awareness of the U.S. Latino consumer market and the inception of Latino-produced and African American-produced films and television.

Initially promoted as a star to Latino and African American niche markets, Lopez subsequently was introduced to a broader U.S audience in highly body-focused publicity that arguably catered in part to traditional notions of Latinas as seductive bodies. While this period in Lopez's star promotion echoed much of the publicity that Rita Moreno had experienced decades earlier, there were substantial differences, however. As I argue in my discussion, Lopez had a degree of agency and creative control in her promotion that had not been experienced by prior Latina stars.

Moreover, this stage was only liminal in Lopez's career. After this initial "crossover," Lopez's career and star image have taken a number of unexpected directions, in regards to both Lopez's literal shape and the shaping of her star image. In her career trajectory, Jennifer Lopez, or "J.Lo" as she is now often known, has quickly established a successful multimedia career. The status of the Lopez franchise in early 2002 demonstrates global star promotion efforts that have not been experienced by a Latina since Dolores Del Rio. Lopez's evolving star image in the last two years highlights the resilience of historical tropes of the Latina body as well as a shifting, newly ambiguous *Latinidad* and whiteness in the spheres of Hollywood celebrity and film, as I highlight in this chapter.

Finally, in Chapter 5, "Still Looking for Brown-Skinned Girls: Speculations on Latina Stardom *Sin Fronteras/Without Borders*," I provide my conclusions with respect to this project and speculate on how my findings illuminate the climate toward Latina actors actively pursuing careers in Hollywood today. In particular, I take up the question of whether the success that Jennifer Lopez has experienced is indicative of greater opportunities for Latina actors as a whole in Hollywood today. Based on case studies and interviews conducted with Latinos working in various roles in the film industry, I conclude by speculating on future opportunities for Latina casting and star promotion.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Dolores Del Rio in the Twenties and Thirties:**

#### **Latina Stardom and the Transition to Sound**

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, research on the most successful Latino/a actors throughout the history of Hollywood film reveals that prior to the mid-1930s, and during the late silent film era of the late 1920s in particular, several Latino and Latina actors experienced a level of global stardom that has not been experienced since, except perhaps since the late 1990s. Given that this treatment of Latino stars in a manner “parallel” to that of their Anglo contemporaries prefaces more ambiguous and racialized dynamics since that time, it is an important era to study with respect to the overall evolution of Latina casting and stardom.

The career and status of Mexican-born Dolores Del Rio can be held up as an example of the opportunity that was briefly offered to Latina actors in this time period. As research into her career bears out, Del Rio became one of the most powerful actresses in Hollywood in the late silent and transitional period, as well as the most successful Latina, within a few years of her arrival in Hollywood in 1925. (*Photoplay* in fact called her the “leader of the Latin invasion” in July 1927). In her heyday, she starred in a number of feature films that became critical and box office hits and were exported overseas, including the silent films *What Price Glory?* (1926), *Loves of Carmen* (1927), and *Resurrection* (1927), and the partial talkie *Ramona* (1928).

Moreover, films in which Del Rio starred in this period were launched and publicized internationally in large part on the basis of her name and image alone, as an analysis of film posters and other materials promoting Del Rio's early films bears out. Dolores Del Rio also was among the top 20 money earners in Hollywood at her career peak (Hadley-Garcia 39). She signed, for example, a \$5 million, multi-film contract with United Artists in 1928,<sup>1</sup> as well as taking part in a first-ever radio broadcast in 1928 to herald the birth of sound film, alongside actors Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks, as I discuss in this chapter.

This superstardom was possible for Del Rio in part because she entered the industry at the right time, when there was a particular interest both in stars with a Latin appearance and in film narratives set in exotic landscapes. While a public fascination with the foreign and cosmopolitan provided unique opportunities to Del Rio and other Latinos to be cast in featured roles and promoted as stars in this era, they did not completely escape marketing that exploited their ethnicity through ambiguous discourses about Latinidad, however. In the case of Del Rio, her Mexican nationality often figured into her construction as a silent film star, as I explore further in this chapter.

The tide of popular interest was soon to turn, moreover, as Del Rio and other Latino actors were to experience. The subject matter and stars of Hollywood films were to change dramatically in the 1930s, due to a variety of factors, most notably the studios' transition from silent to sound film. While Del Rio continued working, she generally was cast only in one-dimensional Latina and other ethnic roles. The star status that Dolores Del Rio achieved in the late 1920s and early '30s simply was not possible after 1934 and notions of star appeal

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<sup>1</sup> Del Rio and her director-manager Edwin Carewe jointly signed contracts with Joe Schenck of United Artists at this time, as was announced in press releases on January 24, 1928.

had solidified in relation to what had come to be established as more “All-American” whiteness and beauty standards. Del Rio eventually left Hollywood to work in Mexican cinema, where she was one of the nation’s top film stars until her death in 1983.

For the purposes of this case study, I focus exclusively on Dolores Del Rio’s career in Hollywood. I examine Del Rio’s star construction from 1925 through 1942, with an emphasis on the transition from silent to sound film (approximately 1928 through 1930) on Del Rio’s career and Latino casting and stardom in general. In this process, I pay particular attention to the industrial and socioeconomic shifts and individual choices and work involved in the development of Del Rio’s star image, including the construction of Dolores Del Rio as a star body. In this work I am guided by the following questions: How was Del Rio’s star image constructed and promoted, particularly with respect to discussion of her beauty and the display of her body? What conditions existed in the film industry and the country that allowed a Mexican actress to become one of Hollywood’s top female stars, and what was at stake in the construction of this stardom? And how did Dolores Del Rio’s image shift with the transition to sound film and the rise of accent as a marker of inclusion and/or difference, particularly in relation to the display and interpretation of Del Rio’s star body?

The work of Hershfield and López on the star image of Dolores Del Rio provided helpful jumping-off points from which to begin this work, although my own work takes a unique direction and delves in greater depth into a number of aspects of Del Rio’s career and image. My contribution in this respect lies in the dense historical contextualization of my analysis, focus on the behind-the-scenes construction of Del Rio’s public image, and direct comparison of Del Rio’s career with that of other stars in later periods. Such a focus promises to glean new information about the evolving stakes involved in Latina stardom in the period in which Del Rio was a top star.

I do benefit from groundbreaking work on the part of both scholars with respect to formulating questions to explore regarding Del Rio's image and career, however. Focusing primarily on analysis of several of Del Rio's Hollywood films, Hershfield concludes that the star often served as a symbol of evolving notions of racialized sexuality and an "enigmatic fascination" to American moviegoers (103). In this study I scrutinize in further depth such enigmatic elements in Del Rio's image and the historical antecedents that lent them resonance, particularly in light of the industrial structures and social developments that contributed to this construction.

López, in a less comprehensive study, briefly examines the changes wrought in Del Rio's career and stardom by the transition to sound film. She argues that Del Rio became a "visual icon in stasis" when her physicality could not be exploited in sound films, in contrast with her positioning as an active, "sensual 'other'" in her silent films ("From Hollywood" 12, 27). I counter-argue and illustrate in this case study that while Del Rio's stardom was in stasis after the transition to sound, she in fact *continued* to be structured as a sensual other in sound films, with this exotic image part and parcel of that stasis. My emphases on the production of Del Rio's stardom and the impact of the broader sociohistorical landscape in the evolution of Del Rio's star image lend evidence to my argument.

To begin, I provide an overview of developments in Hollywood and American culture in the 1920s and 1930s that had an impact on Latino casting and stardom in this period. This includes sections on the opportunity offered to some Latino actors in the late silent film era, changes wrought in the film industry by the rise of the talkie, and the subsequent foregrounding of whiteness in the 1930s Hollywood diegesis. The case study of Dolores Del Rio follows this historical overview. In this case study, I reconstruct the production of Del Rio's star image,

with a focus on her arrival in Hollywood, original star image, and evolving career and public image during and after the transition to sound film.

### **LATIN LOVERS IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF SILENT FILM**

As discussed previously, the proclivities of the American movie-going public offered unique casting and promotional opportunities to a handful of Latino and Latina actors, as well as darkly handsome non-Latinos who fit a Latin Lover profile, in the mid- to late-1920s. In this section I explore the opening for Latinos and other “exotic” stars that was prompted by the era’s rage for melodrama, a passionate acting style in film, and dark foreigners.

At first glance, it is not immediately apparent why a number of Latino and Latina actors found such success in the silent era. Surely in the decade prior to the era’s Golden Age in the late 1920s it was difficult to parse why particular actors appealed to movie audiences. As Sklar states in reference to the 1910s, “[N]obody knew what made a star. ... Natural movement, the glow of a vital personality, perhaps one’s resemblance [sic] to a type, were what seemed to count on the screen” (74). Without the benefit of what would later become a more elaborate and rigid star screening and publicity system, reaction from audiences created stars that sometimes were unexpected throughout the early film era. Beginning with the first star publicity in 1908 and 1909, however, production and distribution companies set about trying to create popular appeal for particular actors and actresses appearing regularly in their photoplays, realizing that this popularity would help sell their films.<sup>2</sup> Publicity campaigns began at this time to market films using actors’ pictures and names, while press books and fan

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<sup>2</sup> Richard DeCordova and Janet Staiger (“Seeing Stars”) are two scholars who have documented the traces of the first star publicity. The “Biograph Girl” was in these years revealed to the public by producer Carl Laemmle to be Florence Lawrence, making Lawrence the first motion picture actor whose name was known by audiences.

magazines reported biographical information on the new picture personalities, some truthful and some manufactured by publicists.

By the late 1920s film companies generally included public relations departments or staff, while film fan magazines were well-established industries unto themselves by the mid 1910s. Talent agents, personal managers, and publicists, often acting as quasi-stylists during this period, also began to play important roles by the 1910s as well. These new industries and players all produced aspects of and maintained star images, promoting films and (generally inadvertently) cultural ideals to audiences in the process.

Acting training was neither a necessity nor a predictor of an actor's potential success during the silent era. Because the requirements of motion picture acting were so drastically different from stage acting, it was considered actually beneficial if new motion picture actors had no background in theater, and thus no habits to unlearn. On the other hand, a background in vaudeville or dance might be beneficial, given the utility of being able to pantomime emotion with grace and expressiveness. Thus it should come as no surprise that the most popular silent film stars of the 1920s often appeared to be the most emotive in their facial and bodily expression, including such stars as the boyishly athletic Douglas Fairbanks and female stars with subtly expressive faces, such as Dorothy Gish and "It Girl" Clara Bow. The successful Latino and Latina actors of the period must also have fulfilled audience expectations in this manner.

In particular, the ability to express energetic passion with their faces and movement was a necessity. As Sklar asserts, "[T]he alternative to traditional American behavior that movie audiences most clearly demanded [during the decades of silent film] was passionate behavior" (100). Such Latino actors as Dolores Del Rio, Antonio Moreno, and Ramon Novarro arguably were made stars by film audiences who not only appreciated their aesthetic appearance, but also were responding to their strong display of passion on the screen. As such there



was a heavy emphasis on the display and expressiveness of their bodies in melodramatic roles. Also of note, they generally were cast in widely diverging roles with respect to nationality and ethnicity, though generally not in Latin roles.

In this era of suffragists, flappers, and tensions over immigration, such social norms as masculinity, femininity, and whiteness were under challenge and at times, revision. As Studlar asserts, “a whole field of cinematic signifiers and cultural intertexts... targeted *female* consumers of film” in the 1920s “through a visual language of Orientalism well established in fashion, design and the arts” and linked to consumerist discourses (“Out-Salomeing Salome” 103). In addition, the preoccupations of the times prompted a fascination for art forms and performers formerly deemed sexually transgressive and/or culturally taboo, such that the tango, Harlem dance clubs, Valentino, and African American performer Josephine Baker became virtual overnight sensations.

The public passion for new looks and particularly for actors deemed exotic in appearance to have had a tremendous impact with respect to opportunity afforded to Latino actors during this period. As such scholars as Walker, Richard Kozarski, and Robert Sklar have characterized and surveys of the stars and subject matter of popular Hollywood films prior to the conversion to sound reveal, this period was marked by fascination on the part of the American moviegoing public with the foreign and cosmopolitan, although “foreign” generally translated as *European* ethnic in this dynamic.

As film directors and actors from Europe and elsewhere such as F.W. Murnau, Erich Von Stroheim, Greta Garbo, and Rudolf Valentino emigrated to the U.S. and took leading roles in the industry and intimate sexual dramas from Germany wowed moviegoers, Americans appeared to be looking outside the U.S. and particularly to Europe for direction in regard to sophistication, culture, and lifestyle. In this time period the film industry also was experiencing a financial

boom, as Colin Shindler documents, which likely encouraged creativity and risk-taking on the part of industry executives.

Similar changes were afoot in the broader popular culture. For example, social dancing became an extremely popular pastime in the 1920s, the time period when “cutting a rug” entered the vernacular, based on the practice of rolling rugs back in homes in order to be able to dance on wood floors. The tango was particularly popular. It received a massive boost when Italian actor Rudolph Valentino danced the tango in *The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* in 1921 (dir. Rex Ingram).

Similarly, in the realm of film, highly emotional melodramas set in exotic locales and populated with passionate and romantic characters were extremely popular on the Hollywood screen. A proportionately high number of these films had specifically Latin themes or passionate and noble Latin protagonists. Douglas Fairbanks’s turn as a Latin rogue in *The Gaucho* (1928), with Lupe Vélez as his jealous consort, is just one example. Kozarski found Latin or Arabian themes present in the top five films screened in the U.S. from 1923-1927 (33), while Walker, in his own survey of the industry’s transition to sound, also documented the public emphasis on the romantic and foreign at this time in Hollywood and American history. The success of Rudolf Valentino’s pictures played a role in prompting this surge of Latin and Arabian-themed melodramas, as David Robinson asserts.

The studios had for years put an embargo on costume films when Fairbanks suddenly enjoyed immense success with the series of films that began with *The Mark of Zorro*, and Valentino forced a new image on the Twenties with *The Sheik*. There was a seemingly unstemmable flow of desert romances and every historical period and exotic locale was explored to provide vehicles for new romantic heroes and heroines like Novarro and Moreno and Mary Astor and Vilma Banky (39).

In addition, the astounding success of Valentino in the early to mid-1920s played no small part in the popularity of “Latin Lover” actors and actresses in this time period. The Valentino craze flowered with *The Sheik* and *The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* in 1921 and was still going strong in 1924 and 1925, when the annual *Exhibitors Herald* poll found that Valentino and Norma Talmadge were the biggest male and female box office draws of the year (Dyer MacCann 9). The original Latin Lover, Valentino’s immense popularity, particularly with female fans, demonstrated the public interest in a new model of sensual masculinity in the form of the passionate and mysterious ethnic Other, as Studlar asserts (*Mad* 153). With respect to female stars in the Latin Lover category, the “orientalized female” in addition held particular allure as stars who “temporarily blurred the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and race” for their audiences, as Matthew Bernstein describes (6).

Regardless of its motivation, the Valentino phenomenon translated to a public, positive disposition toward employing Valentino-like Latino and Latina actors at the time, particularly after the star’s untimely death in 1926 left a void that the public appeared to be clamoring to have filled. Erotic androgyny (on the part of men), an air of mystery, and a darkly handsome appearance became lucrative traits for film actors and actresses to possess. Film scholars such as David Robinson and Richard Dyer MacCann allude to a number of men and women who were cast in Hollywood films both before and after Valentino’s death, at least in part because they had a quality reminiscent of his sophisticated and passionate image. This group of actors included several Latinos, including Ramon Novarro, Dolores Del Rio, Lupe Vélez, Antonio Moreno, and Gilbert Roland.

In line with these trends, American beauty culture capitalized on the national vogue for the foreign as it established itself as a legitimate practice in this time period, as Peiss asserts in her account of the development of the nascent

cosmetic industry in the U.S. from the 1800s through the 1930s. The industry boomed particularly in the 1920s, when the wearing of makeup became more acceptable for middle-class women.<sup>3</sup> Images of non-white women, “American Indian, Egyptian, Turkish, and Japanese enchantresses as well as European belles,” at times paired with invitations to partake in the beauty practices of such elegant exotics as Cleopatra, were often used to advertise relatively new products such as lipstick and rouge in this period (146). Notably, African American women were not included in such promotional imagery, indicating an ideological boundary firmly in place with respect to beauty ideals of the period.

Similarly, in the film industry, studios, actors, and publicists were capitalizing on the popular craze for the ethnic Other. Foreign names and faces were dominant in the American star system of the 1920s, with such actors as Pola Negri, Vilma Banky, Natacha Rambova, and home-grown vamp Theda Bara finding a place within the ranks of the top actors in Hollywood and among the pages of fan magazines. An exotic image and foreign-sounding name became important selling points for an actor or actress hoping to achieve film stardom, and many actors exoticized their image through name changes during this period. For example, “Winnifred Hudnut [or Shaunessey] became Natacha Rambova, and Muriel Harding evolved into Olga Petrova” (Keller 105). Mexican actors, at least light-skinned actors of the Valentino variety, were positioned as “foreign” rather than “non-white” within Hollywood’s schema of the era and considered eligible for stardom. Some non-Latino actors even acquired Latino-sounding names in this time period in order to capitalize on the trendiness of Latin images, the best known example being that of Austrian Jewish actor Jacob Krantz, who changed his name to Ricardo Cortez to capitalize on his Valentino-like looks.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Peiss, the numbers of manufacturers of cosmetics and perfume doubled in the 1910s and 1920s, such that \$700 million was spent on cosmetics annually by the end of the Twenties.

Latinidad was not simplistically viewed as positive within the landscape of popular culture of the period, however. More precisely, the promotion of successful Latino stars of the period performed the function of positioning them as acceptable ethnics. Studlar, in work on the career of Antonio Moreno in the late 1910s, describes this process by which Moreno was promoted to whiteness and thus to being 'the right kind of ethnic' in his star discourse (*Mad* 178). He, like other Latino stars of the silent era, was thus able to avoid the negative connotations that would normally be associated with Latinos and to portray a variety of characters of European descent.

Moreover, tensions were beginning to mount regarding the status of Latinos in the U.S. Mexican immigration increased tremendously in the 1920s, in part because many Mexican citizens fled during the Mexican Revolution. During this period, "nativists" in the U.S. argued for the superiority of Anglo-Saxons and called for the restriction of Mexican immigration, while Southwestern employers asserted their desire for unrestricted immigration so that they might hire Mexican laborers (Sánchez 95-96). These tensions came to a head in Congress, where Mexican immigration was the subject of intense debate when immigration laws were negotiated in 1924, 1926, and 1928. Ultimately, American farmers, industrialists, and the Departments of Labor, Interior, and State joined together to block a bill in 1928 that would have capped Mexican immigration (*Acuña Occupied*).

In addition, despite the popularity of foreign stars in the 1920s, the dominance of "white" Americans was still asserted in many ways in popular culture. Cosmetics industry promotions, even if they included images of beautiful Latinas, for instance, still foregrounded light-skinned, Anglo women as the "fairest of them all." The foundational belief of the era was that "the true American face was still a white face," as Peiss argues (149). The status of light-

skinned Latinas was ambiguous in relation to these national beauty norms, their look considered beautiful but never fully white or American. Linda Mizejewski's scholarship on the racialization of the Ziegfield showgirl similarly documents how a social hierarchy of racialized beauty and feminine purity was constructed in the Ziegfield Follies in the first decades of the twentieth century. As Mizejewski posits, white showgirls in Ziegfield's revues often wore light blackface or café au lait makeup in their raunchier musical numbers, in the process distinguishing the assumed racial and moral purity of the "American" Ziegfield Girl from the hypersexuality of the "dusky belle" (121).

In sum, the popular interests and film genres of the period offered unique opportunity to some Latino and Latina actors to become top stars within the Hollywood star system and international stars with respect to the export of their films around the world. Even in this era of the Latin Lover, however, more ambivalent, pro-Anglo discourses were evident as well. These discourses were soon to be experienced more overtly, as the film industry began to make the transition to sound film and as the Great Depression drastically altered public opinion regarding foreigners and particularly Mexicans in the U.S.

### **THE IMPACT OF THE "AMERICAN" ACCENT**

Ironically, the end of the window of opportunity for Latino and Latina actors was already in sight at the beginning of this period, with the advent of the sound film. This industrial transition was to elevate the newly discovered "American accent" above all else. Prompting and coinciding with shifting public tastes, this change was to have far-reaching impact on Latino actors in Hollywood, as I discuss in this section.

With Warner Bros.' success with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, other American film studios, some quickly and others more grudgingly, began to make the conversion to the production and exhibition of sound film. The transition to

sound film impacted actors in numerous ways. Along with the initial, clunky sound film equipment came diction coaches and a new crop of actors trained on the stage. These actors were brought in by the studios because of their assumed proficiency with dialogue and ability to act within the confines the new sound equipment dictated in the transitional years. Already established Hollywood film actors suddenly faced an uncertain future.

Foreign actors had to worry whether their English and accents would be accepted or if their Hollywood careers would soon be over. Walker, in his survey of the coverage of trade and fan magazines during and after the transition, found that actors begin to be panned after their first talkies for a variety of complaints: for having voices considered too weak or not “robust” enough, for lacking what was deemed to be the appropriate emotional register for a particular role, or for having a voice that appeared to indicate a lack of education or class. Gender stereotypes also played into these notions in the case of actors whose voices were considered not feminine or masculine enough to match their screen images. Attention might be called in addition to affectations brought on by voice training, such as was the case of the discussion of John Gilbert’s voice in *Weary River* (1929). His voice is called both “affected and self-conscious” (*New York Times*, 5 Oct. 1929) and “pleasing to hear... not lacking a certain warmth” (*Motion Picture Classic*, Jan. 1930) by different reviewers, which also highlights the whimsical nature of the critiques that would contribute to the making or breaking of actors’ careers after the transition to sound.

Successful stars who didn’t speak English fluently or who had “non-American” accents suddenly had to take crash courses in English and elocution to attempt to save their careers. Voice coaches and extensive practice with home Dictaphones™ were typical routes taken by anxious actors and actresses of all nationalities at this time. Among those whose Hollywood careers were stopped short at this time, at least in part by their poor English or accent, were Clara Bow,

Vilma Banky, Emil Jannings, and John Gilbert, as scholars such as Walker and Crafton document.

Particularly important with respect to long-term impact on Hollywood cinema, production executives had to wrestle with what American dialogue spoken in an American accent should sound like. Notions of race and class played no small part in this process. While to date there has been no in-depth study of this aspect of American film history, scholarship thus far bears out that “cultured,” British-inflected English initially was seized as the most desirable accent for the American screen. This was at least in part because precise enunciation was considered necessary in the first few years of sound film production, given the limitations of early microphones. As Allen Metcalf elaborates:

The first talking movies ... used the language of the stage, and the American stage was inclined to a formal semi-British style of speech. Actors adopted British vowels and dropped their “r”s after vowels (as in “hahd” for *hard*) in the manner of British and some Eastern American speakers. ... The accent, still used by Americans who would to put on British to do Shakespeare, was called “Transatlantic,” because, as the author of *Teach Yourself Transatlantic: Theater Speech for Actors* (1986) explains, it is “the kind of speech that might be heard somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean exactly halfway between New York City and London.” On the Titanic, perhaps? (178-179).

While British English was soon dropped as the ideal, this initial preference and other cultural biases in the first years of sound had a profound impact on actors’ careers. For example, William C. Demille, in describing problems that got in the way of some actors’ achieving the proper, upper-class American accent, stated that “the rolling Western ‘r’ gives the lie to an otherwise excellent ‘society’ characterization...” (*Scribners* April 1929, qtd. in Crafton 450). American-born actors with Brooklyn accents such as Norma Talmadge and Clara Bow also found their accents weren’t all-American enough for the studios, unless confined to



particular genres whose story worlds were associated with lower-class Americans, such as the gangster film.

With respect to Latino actors and actresses, scholars and writers disagree about the impact of this transitional period on their careers. While greatly differing opinions have been posited by film scholars and Latino star *aficionados* regarding how Hispanic accents were received by American audiences, the rejection of the “telltale Western ‘r’” seems a strong clue that Latino actors with Spanish accents either faced the end of their Hollywood careers or were saddled with the handicap of having to take roles that incorporated their accent. Some Latinos, like *Mexicana* Lupita Tovar, were given little opportunity in talkies because of their accents (Ankerich).

Others, such as Lupe Vélez, survived the transition but faced new constraints with respect to the types of roles they might play. In the new sound films, Hispanic accents typically were played up for humor (in the case of comic roles) or an increased sense of danger (in the case of villain roles); heroes and heroines didn’t have Hispanic accents in the new, aurally defined Hollywood mainstream. Vélez, like many other Latinos of the time, found that limited comic roles were generally the only speaking parts that she was offered in sound film, particularly as the thirties waned. At the time of her suicide in 1944, she was best known for the RKO *Mexican Spitfire* B-film series, in which fractured English played prominently in her role for laughs; this role typified the situation that most Latino actors faced with respect to casting options. Dolores Del Rio, while experiencing more opportunity than other Latinas in Hollywood, faced the same industrial constraints with respect to accent, as will be detailed further in this chapter.

As film fan magazines such as *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture World* began to report on sound film and on the new crop of actors, it became apparent that many stars of the late silent period no longer had an obvious starring role to play

in the textual world of film.<sup>4</sup> Character and non-melodramatic roles, such as the gangster roles played by James Cagney and musical ingenues played by Ruby Keeler, began to be increasingly popular. Benjamin Hampton aptly describes these changes taking place within Hollywood film with respect to popular character types:

During all the years of silent films, the lovers inevitably were the center of attraction. Experienced and expert character actors had received little attention—save for a few exceptions—and their value in the market was one-fifth to one-tenth that of the romantic stars. When, however, talkie audiences were able to hear voices as well as watch acting, they broadened their appreciation for non-romantic as well as romantic roles (401).

Not only were audiences increasing their appreciation for non-romantic film stories and characters, they often were uncomfortable with romantic melodrama – formerly silent – that now included spoken dialogue. As Hampton argues, “audiences ... found it embarrassing to hear, to *overhear* a man declare his passion for a woman. ... They were embarrassed; and because they were embarrassed, they laughed” (169-170).

As a result of these various reactions, the transition to sound film involved a related and simultaneous renegotiation of film genres to appeal to the shifting interests of American audiences, particularly as dialogue and sound effects came to dominate American films in the first years of sound. These changes included most notably the rise of such genres as the Hollywood musical and the gangster film and the waning of the romantic melodrama. In particular, this genre shift and new emphasis on dialogue rang the death knell for Great Lover characters. New, wise-cracking romantic leads such as those played by Clark Gable and Jean Harlow rose to replace those formerly in vogue. As Ethan Mordden asserted in

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Walker documents that the motion picture fan magazines were slow in reporting on sound film, with the quickest taking up to a year to begin to devote substantial space to the topic.

relation to the shift, “Spoken dialogue, in the naturalistic survey of the talkie, made lyricism perilous” (147). The “liberation of speech” naturally prompted “the repression of the body” in film, such that the physically expressive Lovers, and the actors who played them, no longer were in fashion (Williams 135).

Meanwhile, the growing power of the studio system and studio-dominated star system further marginalized Latino and Latina stars. As Latino stars began to be seen as not quite the American ideal, not quite white, many doors were closing on even the most successful. The Hollywood studios that survived the transition to sound increasingly were driven by the star vehicle, which became “the primary coordinating principle for executives on both coasts” in the 1930s (Schatz *Genius* 40). Without a place within the realm of the A-list star vehicle, around which the industry increasingly came to rely, Latino actors were relegated to small, supporting turns or B-film projects.

The beginning of the enforcement of the Production Code in 1934 also arguably played a part in the decreasing opportunities for Latino actors and actresses throughout this period. The Production Code, in essence a form of industry self-censorship in order to stave off governmental regulation, consolidated and reinforced the industry’s growing American project, as scholars such as Sklar and Shindler argue. The Code ostensibly banned both racial defamation in the form of slurs or demeaning portrayals and miscegenation, defined as sexual relations between people of the white and black races.

These strictures left Latino actors and characters, defined in the U.S. at this time as neither black nor white, in a hazy limbo. Like the other rules of the Code, these stipulations also were under constant, film-by-film interpretation by staff of the Hays Office. With respect to Latino representation in ten social-problem films released between 1935 and 1962, Noriega found that beyond prohibiting anti-Mexican slurs in films such as *Giant* (1956), the Hays Office was almost wholly concerned with whether film content might offend people in

Mexico and other Latin American countries (“Citizen”). The reaction of Mexican Americans and other Latino Americans apparently was peripheral if given thought at all, even when the characters in question happened to be Mexican American.<sup>5</sup> Cortés, in turn, has pointed out a dichotomy with respect to how the ban on miscegenation was interpreted in the case of Latino and Latina characters. For example, with respect to male characters, Cortés documents:

It was not permissible for greasers – dark skinned Mexican or other Latino men – to have successful love affairs with Anglo women. (127) ... Mexican men could not win the hand of Anglo women (although a few light-skinned Spanish-type men did) (128).

The rules were reversed however, in the case of white male characters and Latinas of a particular type.

Anglo men could be successful with Mexican women. ... In most of these cases, the Mexican women turned out to be relatively light-skinned (black hair was acceptable), somewhat cultured (for a Latina), and usually of good Spanish or at least elite Latino background (Cortés 128).

Thus the Code likely had a chilling effect on the casting of Latinos in romantic lead roles opposite Euroamerican actors, with the impact of the Code on various actors reflecting continuing tensions around the ambiguous racial and ethnic status of Latinos in the United States with respect to phenotype, gender, and class.

Latino stardom thus was never to match the level of possibility that existed in the late silent film era. As Hispanic accents increasingly were coded as comic or threatening and always as un-American, and the Production Code also tended to prohibit Latino actors from portraying romantic leads, Latino stars faced a

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<sup>5</sup> Noreiga asserts that this was based in part on the industry’s reliance on exporting to these markets during the Good Neighbor era. He adds that Mexico, rather than Mexican Americans, served as the “external guiding intelligence” for the Production Code Administration’s decisions in this regard (“Citizen” 89).

limited future in Hollywood. Such actors, even those who previously had been top stars, now were generally relegated to sidekick roles at best.

### **1930s HOLLYWOOD: AN “ALL-AMERICAN” STAR SYSTEM**

The textual world of Hollywood film also seems to have become more “white” in the 1930s, and in particular after the Production Code began to be enforced in 1934. The social preoccupations and inclinations of the times also played a large part in the lessening of opportunity that Latino actors experienced in the 1930s. The Great Depression in particular dampened American enthusiasm for foreign stars and increased the preoccupation with defining what it meant to be American.

After a decade of prosperity in the U.S.,<sup>6</sup> the economic fallout of the Depression resulted in unprecedented, widespread unemployment and poverty and a related rise of a new Americanism in the public imagination. Thus with the onset of the Depression (*La Crisis* in Spanish) in 1930, previously contested attitudes toward Mexicans and Mexican Americans turned increasingly negative. The new patriotism often defined Mexican Americans (and by default, other Latinos) as un-American and a threat to the U.S. with respect to employment opportunities.

Anti-Mexican sentiment was promoted in particular by President Hoover, who, after denouncing Mexicans “as one of the causes of the Depression” in 1930, established the first border patrol and initiated the deportation of massive numbers of Mexicans (Sánchez 213). When the Great Depression hit California, for instance, it resulted in devastating unemployment and poverty. From 1929 to 1934, between 500,000 and 600,000 Mexicans *and* Mexican Americans were

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<sup>6</sup> Shindler documents that for instance, “[b]y 1929 the country had spent twice as much on libraries as it had in 1914 and three times as much as it had on hospitals. In 1929 the United States paid out more to educate its children than the rest of the world combined” (9).

coerced into leaving California and other Southwestern states for Mexico (R. Reynolds McKay, qtd. in Acuña *Occupied* 221).

Hollywood was in no way left out of the crisis. In Los Angeles, by now firmly established as the nation's movie-making capital, 41.6 percent of Angelenos were reported to be unemployed (Acuña *Occupied* 216). The Mexican American theater community in Los Angeles, for example, was decimated by the joint devastation of the repatriation of talented actors, playwrights, and directors, and massive poverty and unemployment, as Nicolas Kanellos has documented. More generally, Mexican American neighborhoods were hard hit by new barriers to employment and massive poverty related to *La Crisis*. The status of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in this time period thus further obstructed them from working in a creative capacity in the film industry and reinforced negative stereotypes that many non-Latinos held.

Meanwhile, the Hollywood studios were facing difficulties on two fronts. First, film attendance dipped alarmingly in the early to mid-1930s, at least partially as a result of Americans having less money to spend on leisure pursuits as a result of the Depression. Various religious and civic groups, most notably the Catholic organization the Legion of Decency, also were calling for local, state, and national censorship of films because of what was deemed racy, un-American subject matter in motion pictures. In reaction, film executives and producers increasingly took the safe route in catering to conservative elements and emphasizing "Americanism" in films. The establishment and enforcement of the Production Code as a "thermostat" of social, political and sexual mores was just one aspect of this shift (Shindler 96). As Sklar describes, "Hollywood directed its enormous powers of persuasion to preserving the basic moral, social and economic tenets of traditional American culture," with the goals of "fostering a spirit of patriotism, unity and commitment to national values" (175). American cinema in this manner became more conservative and patriotic by the mid-1930s.

In a corresponding shift with respect to images of women in the general popular culture, the thirties meanwhile were a time when interest in the foreign was on the wane and distinctly “American” fashion and beauty notions were being formulated, according to Polly Plevin. Ideals of chaste femininity, thrift, and natural beauty were privileged as American ideals, a shift from the prior decade of the New Woman. As *Photoplay* reported in September 1933, the in-fashion film star of the day had an appearance of “[v]itality and unsophisticated beauty... gone are the days of languorous eyes and exotic makeup! The demand is for natural, healthy beauty...” (Maxwell 34). The beauty advice paired with Hollywood stars in this time period privileged such associations as well. For example, “[f]emale stars emphasized the importance of diets and beauty-building exercises which every woman could do, rather than the value of expensive cosmetics” (Schindler 214).

As a result of these various developments, stars became what Walker terms “more ‘democratic’ and less ‘divine,’” though the term democratic is arguably a misnomer here with respect to race and ethnicity (209). In star promotion of the 1930s, family life, “all-American” looks, and down-to-earth personalities were emphasized over the exotic and highly glamorous narratives attached to many stars of earlier decades. As Shindler argues, “[t]he stars of the 1930s were the girl or boy ‘next door’ types like Ginger Rogers or James Stewart” (214).

While this wasn’t generally spelled out, the new vogue also was for actors who were fair-skinned and of Western European extraction. The term “all American” in fact appears more and more often in film and star publicity at this time. A comparison of Hollywood stars and beauty queens from the 1920s through the 1930s reveals that in the thirties blondes also became particularly alluring, with such stars of the newly talking pictures as Jean Harlow representing this trend. This fascination stemmed at least in part from the symbolic cachet of

blondes within American popular culture as “the most unambiguously white you can get” (Dyer *Heavenly* 43).

### **HOLLYWOOD LATINOS OF THE THIRTIES: GOOD NEIGHBORS, BUT NOT MUCH ELSE**

In an interesting juxtaposition, the Good Neighbor film cycle also began in the 1930s and was well under way in the last half of the decade and early 1940s. RKO and Twentieth Century-Fox in particular contributed a large number of films to the cycle, which was motivated by the need to cultivate foreign markets before and during World War II and to maintain Latin American countries as political allies while the Axis powers were doing the same.<sup>7</sup> The cycle had little impact on Latino stardom in other Hollywood films, however.

Interestingly, popular belief often pinpoints this time period as the peak of opportunity for Latino and Latin American actors in Hollywood film history. For example, Clint Wilson and Felix Gutierrez discuss the Good Neighbor era as a time when Hispanic actors and actresses “virtually flooded Hollywood” (80). Cortés also claims that “Latinas, particularly *Mexicanas*, achieved a more extensive screen presence” during the Good Neighbor era (129). But while these films arguably were produced with a heightened concern to create non-derogatory Latino images, the period in fact was less open to Latino and Latina stardom than the prior era, as the following case study of Dolores Del Rio illustrates.

Issues of ideological content aside, films in the Good Neighbor cycle generally had white protagonists, with storylines merely being set in exotic, picture-postcard Latin American landscapes. As such they generally did not

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<sup>7</sup> Genres within the cycle, which included as many as 84 films with Latin-inflected settings and storylines, ran the gamut from musicals to dramas to biopics. The cycle, for example, included such Latin musicals as RKO’s early entry, *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), with Dolores Del Rio, and Warner Bros.’ *Juarez* (1939), starring Paul Muni in the title role of the Mexican political leader Benito Pablo Juárez.



provide the star-making opportunities to Latino actors and actresses that were afforded a decade earlier to stars such as Ramón Novarro and Del Río. Latinos, often in the role of nightclub performers, merely serve as comic or romantic foils, ethnic diversions from the “real” stars and story. In terms of Latina images, a non-threatening humor and de-sexualized beauty became the dominant characteristics of Good Neighbor film roles, with newcomer Carmen Miranda epitomizing the role of the Latina star of such films, as López points out in her scholarship on the cycle (“Are There Latins”). When particularly well-developed Latino and Latina lead roles did exist, Latino actors often were not cast in these major roles. Rather, white actors in brownface makeup often played these parts, prominent examples being the roles played by Paul Muni and Bette Davis as Benito Pablo Juárez and Empress Carlota von Habsburg in *Juárez* (1939, dir. William Dieterle).

No longer considered for romantic lead roles and relegated to the sidelines as second-fiddle and comic characters, most Latino actors and actresses were effectively unable to maintain their star status (or if newcomers, to achieve this level of status) over the course of the decade. Donald Crafton, in his discussion of the situation for non-white actors after the transition to talkies, points to sound as a major factor in the increasing marginalization of non-white actors in film at this time. He explains that with sound, “ethnic voices and musical traditions could readily be expropriated, transformed into entertainment, while both cordoning off and erasing the source” (416). Increasingly, *Latinidad* was linked with music and dance in films. As discussed above, the Latin musical, the most popular genre of the Good Neighbor film cycle, tended to confine Latino performers to exoticized and circumscribed roles, with Carmen Miranda and her *tutti-frutti* hat the most blatant emblems of that trend.

A survey of popular films of the era also supports Crafton’s thesis; non-comedic Latin Lover characters for the most part didn’t survive the 1930s. The

Latin Lover became a weaker and sometimes even absurd or grotesque figure, and one that didn't prompt film producers to hire actors with olive complexions and an air of mystery for starring roles as it had in the 1920s. The Latin Lover was figuratively killed off, both by the coming of sound and the times. Typical was Ramon Novarro's comic parody of his former Latin Lover roles in Republic's *The Sheik Steps Out* (1937).

The limited options that Latino actors faced in the sound era included taking roles in the Spanish-language versions of studio films, as Antonio Moreno, Lupita Tovar, and occasionally Lupe Vélez chose to do. Other actors found work in English-language films, but only in the confined role of the ethnic "interloper-performer" such as Crafton makes allusion to, a niche most notably filled by Carmen Miranda, who made her living almost exclusively typecast in this manner.<sup>8</sup> Dolores Del Rio was among those who made Good Neighbor-flavored musicals, both for RKO and Warner Bros. in the late 1930s. Another option was working in "B" pictures made cheaply by smaller studios, in roles that often exploited stereotypes for laughs or suspense. For example, Ramon Novarro, "to his eternal discomfort," found work in Republic's film parodies of major studio films (Mordden 175), while Gilbert Roland played such parts as a Latin boy toy in the Mae West vehicle *She Done Him Wrong* (1934) and Clara Bow's "half-breed" lover in Fox's *Call Her Savage* (1932).

Very few Latino actors or actresses were able to become major stars during the next two decades, and none reached the status of the Latino stars of the late silent era, with Cesar Romero, Gilbert Roland, and Ricardo Montalban being three of the few Latinos consistently cast in film roles during this period. Given the sentiment of the times, some up-and-coming actors of Latino descent

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<sup>8</sup> Daryl Zanuck, then head of Twentieth Century Fox, is credited by some with inventing and exploiting the role of the "third-billed olio of house entertainer, literally vaudeville acts plopped in to fill out a thin story," with Miranda his most popular performer in this sort of role in the 1940s (Mordden 276).

Anglicized their names, images, and histories in the 1930s and '40s in order to potentially better appeal to (presumably white) American audiences. Ian Jarvie, in a study of the ethnic backgrounds of the most popular Hollywood film stars from 1932 through 1951, found that a “non-ethnic” or “WASP” whiteness was the overwhelming norm in the Hollywood star system throughout this period.<sup>9</sup> This was the case even for Latino actors such as Louis Cristillo, who was better known to the American public as Lou Costello (and as Italian rather than Latino), one half of the popular Abbott and Costello comedy duo. In many ways the doors to stardom had been closed to Latinos and Latinas who stayed true to their natural appearance and ethnic origins. This became a more solidified Hollywood norm over time, even after the studio system began to be dismantled, as Rita Moreno, the subject of the next chapter, discovered in the 1950s.

#### **STARDOM BEFORE THE NEED TO “CROSS”: DOLORES DEL RIO**

This was the historical and industrial context in which Dolores Del Rio worked in Hollywood. With respect to her peak success, Del Rio was one of several Mexican actors who achieved star billing in Hollywood films during the height of the aforementioned “Latin Lover” period of the 1920s. Her entrance into the star system in the late 1920s thus serves as a vivid illustration of how the vogue for the foreign and exotic in Hollywood created an opening for some Latinos during the late silent period, while her Hollywood career as a whole illustrates the shifts that took place over the next decades.

Given the emphasis on Del Rio’s family background in the construction of her star image, certain facts about the childhood of Dolores Del Rio are well known. Much of this information can be found in the biography compiled by her first Hollywood publicist, Harry D. Wilson, in 1927. Such “bios” often were (and

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<sup>9</sup> Jarvie relied on annual exhibitors’ reports on the top-ten box office draws stars of these years for this purposes of his analysis.

are) delivered to news outlets and fan magazines by studios and publicists in order to generate publicity about a performer; like press releases, their facts, emphasis, and even wording often are published or broadcast by those news outlets with only a little variation from the original. The information listed here, presumably the “facts” regarding Del Rio’s life, thus was likely repeated in film fan magazines and newspapers around the country and the world.

According to the biography and other sources, Del Rio was born Maria Dolores Asúnsolo, in Durango, Mexico, on August 3, 1905. She grew up in a wealthy family of Spanish-Basque heritage; her father was a bank president and landowner in Durango. The family moved from Durango to Mexico City when Dolores was still a young child, however, when Durango became too dangerous because of the activity of Pancho Villa and his army of revolutionaries (Reyes and Rubie 454). Del Rio (then Asúnsolo) attended school at the Convent of St. Joseph in Mexico City, where she reportedly was allowed to only speak French and also learned several other languages. For her own amusement she also studied dance in Europe; she later became known as one of the finest tango dancers among the Mexican elite. At 15, she married wealthy Jaime Martinez del Rio; they embarked on an extended honeymoon in Europe soon after and eventually settled into the life of the privileged in Mexico City. Known as one of the best dancers in Mexico City, Dolores would at times perform the tango or other Latin dances at society and charity functions.

It was at such an event that Del Rio met American film director Edwin Carewe, who was to become her first Hollywood manager. The story has it that Carewe, in Mexico City with his fiancé and another couple so that the two couples could marry, saw Del Rio dance a tango at a party given at the del Rios’ in their honor and was immediately impressed by her beauty. The Carewes and Del Rios struck up a long-term friendship, and Carewe continually urged the Mexican couple to come to Hollywood so Dolores could try her hand at film

acting and Jaime at screenwriting (“He told me I was the female Valentino,” Del Rio said in an interview published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1981). The possibility that Dolores Del Rio might try her hand at film acting in Hollywood, and whether this was appropriate for a young Mexican woman of high standing, was a subject of hot debate throughout Mexico, prompting a myriad of newspaper stories and editorials that hashed out both sides of the argument.

The Del Rios finally relented in 1925. According to the biography, Jaime initially went to Hollywood alone to observe the scene and later cabled Dolores to tell her that it would be fine for her to visit as well. Dolores Del Rio was 20 at the time. Del Rio is quoted in a Mexican newspaper as saying that she hoped to be able to present an image of the sophisticated *Mexicana* that was missing in Hollywood film at the time. “It is my dearest wish to make fans realize their [Mexicans’] real beauty, their wonder, their greatness as a people. The vast majority seem to regard Mexicans as a race of bandits, or laborers, dirty, unkempt, and uneducated. My ambition is to show the best that’s in my nation” (qtd. in Carr 42).

Edwin Carewe must be credited as the first and most influential shaper of Dolores Del Rio’s star image in Hollywood. The young director had a background in acting himself, having been a member of Metro’s players before moving on to directing (Edwin Carewe file, Margaret Herrick Library). At the time that Dolores Del Rio consented to work with Carewe in 1925, he had a multi-picture deal with First National and was a popular director with other studios as well. Carewe placed Del Rio under personal contract and acted as her manager in her first years in Hollywood, guiding the creation of Del Rio’s star image and introduction to the movie-going public, as well as directing her in many of her first films. Carewe in fact is often mentioned alongside Del Rio in early news items introducing the young starlet and as such can be viewed as Del Rio’s “patron” in the mainstream American mass media. For example, Del Rio’s

1927 biography states Carewe “guided her up the ladder of film fame, teaching her, step by step, and spending all of his available time in giving her a complete insight of the great motion picture industry” (Wilson 4). This publicized association arguably boosted Del Rio's status, particularly as a Mexican starlet in Hollywood, when she was still relatively unknown to American audiences. The necessity that Del Rio be labeled the “right kind of ethnic” in the construction of an appealing public image at this stage of her career must be underscored.<sup>10</sup>

Not only did Carewe enhance Del Rio's credibility during this formative period in the construction of her star image, he also provided what might be termed a producing partnership that was extremely important to the success of female stars at the time, regardless of ethnic background. As biographer Larry Carr states, successful actresses of the period almost always had a director or producer husband also in the business with them, as all actors and actresses had to scramble to compete for the best star-vehicle story material and production contracts. DeWitt Bodeen asserts that Carewe was smitten with Del Rio since their first meeting; whatever his motivation, it is clear that Carewe was determined that Del Rio become a top Hollywood star. He was in a position to make this happen in his dual role as both her director and personal manager, able not only to shape her publicity, but also to cast her in compelling, star-making roles and to direct her in them. Carewe's attention to Del Rio's career and ability to produce, direct, and guide the publicity of her projects undoubtedly was instrumental to Del Rio's early stardom.

Del Rio's film career began in 1925 with a bit role as a society vamp in Carewe's “jazz baby” romance, *Joanna*. Apparently much of her work in this

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<sup>10</sup> Questions of race and ethnicity aside, even today stardom is built upon the promise of success, such that the visible support of another industry employee already deemed successful can be a strong career boost to a newcomer and thus can play an instrumental role in star construction. Thus working with successful directors is considered a career enhancement, while the status of an actor's agent also generally plays a role in an actor's opportunities, and so on.

first film ended up on the cutting room floor, but roles in four films followed in 1926. This included a small part in Carewe's society drama *High Steppers* and the lead in his crime caper/romance *Pals First*, as well as a bit role as Rita Renault in a comedy for which Del Rio was loaned out to Universal Pictures, *The Whole Town's Talking* (dir. Edward Laemmle). These films unfortunately are not available for public viewing, while promotional materials also largely have not been preserved.

A number of publicity photos from the beginning of Del Rio's career provide a glimpse of what she looked like upon her entrance in Hollywood. A First National publicity still from early 1926 emphasizes Del Rio's petite stature. With her slightly pudgy middle and arms, she in fact may have fallen a bit short of the ideal of "rounded slenderness" of the time (Addison 11). With respect to her stage makeup, Del Rio sported the dark cupid's bow mouth and pale foundation makeup of the era.<sup>11</sup>

Del Rio was given an early career boost at this time by being named one of the up-and-coming "Baby Stars" by WAMPAS, the Western Association of Motion Picture Advertisers, in early 1926, alongside starlets Joan Crawford, Mary Astor, Janet Gaynor, and Fay Wray. The film publicists' organization declared a roster of 13 such Baby Stars from 1922 to 1934 at an annual awards ceremony. According to *Photoplay*, being named a Baby Star meant that "one hundred enterprising publicity men of the films believe you have the possibilities of becoming a star" (Feb. 1926, 66). In the days before the Oscars, a nod from WAMPAS as a young actress "most likely to succeed" was extremely beneficial to help establish a film acting career, as it ensured a great deal of free publicity. Del Rio was thus in a sense given her debut into the Hollywood star system at the Annual WAMPAS Frolic in 1926.

While Del Rio's Latin ethnicity and olive complexion are not apparent in the 1926 WAMPAS publicity photo, given that she is wearing clothes of the period that are basically identical to that of the other young actresses, her skin color additionally appears identical to that of the other women, and her face is partially hidden by a hat, *Photoplay*, in its two-page coverage of the year's "bouquet of beauty," took pains to distinguish Del Rio from the other Baby Stars (Feb. 1926, 66). The fan magazine discussed Del Rio last of all of the starlets and positioned her photo in the bottom right-hand corner of the two-page spread, the position of the least priority. Del Rio also is referred to as the "daughter of a distinguished Mexican family," and as a "Castilian beauty" who "Edwin Carewe persuaded... to leave the social life of Mexico City for Hollywood" (67) in the article, such that she is simultaneously marked as both non-American and of greater financial privilege than the other starlets. Notably, high-class and *Spanish* Mexican nationals were generally held in high regard in the American imaginary at the time.

Meanwhile, Del Rio's career was taking off in other ways. *Pals First* (1926) marked Del Rio's first starring role and reviews in the entertainment news media. The response from critics was not warm, however, which may point to social tensions that existed at the time over Latino stardom. *Variety*, referring to Del Rio as a "Latin actress" and "Edwin Carewe discovery," described Del Rio's performance as "disappointing." In particular, the reviewer took umbrage with Del Rio's "Latin" appearance.

Her Latin type for one thing does not jibe with the aristocratic Southern atmosphere, in addition to which Miss Del Rio's personal accomplishments as a screen actress are negative. Her eyes, of Oriental type, are an odd combination with the Spanish features. Whatever registration is essayed is but mild. (Aug. 25, 1926).

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<sup>11</sup> Pale foundation also was necessary for film actors working with the motion picture cameras of the period. Whitening the face was necessary so that red corpuscles in the face would not be visible (Berry 113).



The critics' opinions quickly turned around with Del Rio's fourth role in 1926, however. In Fox Film's comedic World War I tale *What Price Glory*, Dolores Del Rio portrayed Charmaine, a flirtatious French innkeeper's daughter caught in a love triangle between two American officers, a performance that garnered Del Rio her first notice as a star presence. *Variety* predicted that the film would be a big success, based in no small part on Del Rio's sex appeal, shedding light on Fox's likely promotional spin on its new star: "[S]he registers like a house afire. It is no wonder she had the whole army after her!" (Dec. 1, 1926).

In a striking parallel to the emphasis on the *derrière* of Jennifer Lopez in her star discourse of 1998, Del Rio also was positioned to back into the limelight of the American star system. The first shot of Del Rio as Charmaine in the film, in fact, is of her well-rounded backside as she bends over a bucket; the camera in fact lingers there for several seconds. This positioning and framing of Del Rio highlights the role she plays in the film, that of a free-spirited woman who can't help but share passionately of herself, with not one, but two men. Charmaine's body and vivacious spirit in fact dominate much of the film. Although portrayed as an inviting body in the film, the character of Charmaine is in fact French rather than Latina, however.

Already promoted as a major star before garnering reviews for the film, Dolores Del Rio's image was used prominently in the film's publicity. Several promotional stills included a bodily emphasis which echoed that in the film, through portraying Del Rio in a spirited tug of war between the two male leads. Publicity stills of Del Rio also were made into postcards that advertised the film in the U.S. and abroad. As close-ups of Del Rio were the sole focus of much of this advertising material, it can be surmised that she was viewed as a strong enough box-office draw to bring in movie audiences based on the appeal of her beauty alone. The film in fact did prove to be a huge hit. The song "Charmaine"

also became extremely popular with audiences, who were able to buy the sheet music in theater lobbies; over a million copies were reportedly sold (Walker 82).

### **THE PRODUCTION OF DOLORES DEL RIO, HOLLYWOOD STAR**

Aside from film publicity materials, the star image of Dolores Del Rio also was being constructed in film fan magazines and local newspapers during this time period. Del Rio's early star promotion constructed the Mexican actress as a well-bred and glamorous exotic, an image that stood in sharp contrast to the physicality and earthiness of many of her early film roles in this period. In this regard, Del Rio's publicity tended to focus on her elite upbringing and sophisticated style. Such details of Del Rio's background as her convent education, wealth, and early training in ballet and foreign languages were prominently featured in articles and cutlines that accompanied publicity photographs. Del Rio's Mexican ethnicity never ceased to figure in to these discourses in interesting ways, however, particularly as reviewers tended to call attention to the uniqueness of her Mexican (often described as Spanish or Castilian) beauty.

Del Rio's image was made more palatable for white audiences, additionally, through the many associations in her promotion with the trappings of wealth, and perhaps more importantly, with references to strict morality. Wilson, a high-profile Hollywood publicist and perhaps not coincidentally, former president of WAMPAS, targeted magazines and newspapers with a constant barrage of stories and photographs that capitalized on the more positive stereotypes of high-class Mexicans of the day and proactively avoided the landmines of negative stereotypes. As Wilson trumpeted in his first biography of Del Rio:

This is the first time in film history that a Mexican girl has risen to the highest rung of filmdom's ladder. Mexico justly rejoices in her

achievements and her tremendous success. ... Her social standing in Los Angeles and Hollywood is one of the highest and her friends cannot be counted in numbers. She is active in society and welfare work and spends many hours of her spare time in helping worthy causes (6).

Del Rio's heritage is mentioned in most of this early publicity and used to differentiate her in a generally positive, if ambiguous way from other starlets. Del Rio was often distinguished from other starlets through allusions to her dark beauty or ethnic background. *Photoplay*, for example, dubbed Del Rio "The Daughter of the Dons," and a "perfect Latin type" in an early article (Ivan St. John, June 1927, 66).

A rhetoric of leisure and lack of career ambition also was emphasized in this discourse. Pains were taken to underscore that Del Rio had never needed to engage in such unseemly behavior as training or grooming in order to establish a career as a Hollywood actress. For example, *Photoplay* offered this description of Del Rio's entree into Hollywood:

She was rich. She was happily married. She had everything she wanted. Dolores Del Rio came to Hollywood seeking neither fame nor romance nor money. She went into the movies "just for fun." But the movies refuse to let her go, because she is one of the great discoveries of the year (June 1927, 66).

Del Rio's physical image was the careful construction of Carewe, publicist Harry D. Wilson, Del Rio, and of the studios that produced and distributed Del Rio's films, with Carewe Productions/Inspiration Pictures and distributors First National and United Artists playing the largest role in this process. Quickly after Del Rio arrived in Hollywood, it had been determined that she would be groomed to better appeal to American audiences. According to Carr, "[t]he young Mexican matron of twenty who came to Hollywood to try her luck in films bore little resemblance to the acknowledged beauty of world-wide fame she was to become... Shy and reserved, she dressed conservatively and wore almost no

makeup. The film colony found her ‘interesting’ and ‘pretty in a foreign way,’ but privately some thought her ‘kind of dowdy’ and ‘too sedate’” (5). Considering the rising popularity of New Woman fashion and beauty practices such as bobbed hair and shorter hemlines, personified by such “jazz babies” of the era as Clara Bow and Joan Crawford, Del Rio’s personal style fit better with an earlier definition of femininity in the U.S.

Peggy Hamilton, a designer and fashion expert known for designing clothes for Gloria Swanson, was commissioned to create a wardrobe for Del Rio as early as 1925, according to Carr. Hamilton can be seen as a precursor to stylists who assist contemporary starlets in constructing what they hope will be an appealing public image. In her role, Hamilton was instrumental in Del Rio’s cultivation of a high fashion look that was to become her trademark. As a result of these efforts, “[Del Rio’s] style evolved from the rich, very Mexican look she brought to Hollywood in the mid-20’s. By the early 30s she was wearing clothes that indicated no national origin: the style was high and, on screen or off, Del Rio always dressed like a star” (Carr 20). Hamilton also served to an extent in the capacity of what would be considered an agent or personal manager’s role today, throwing large parties at which fan magazine writers and others in the press could meet Del Rio.

The result of these efforts was a rash of positive publicity for the young Dolores Del Rio, such that her name was reportedly known widely by the release of her second film. The images of Del Rio that circulated from 1926 to 1928 that were not direct film advertising ranged from “personal” photos of Del Rio with family members and/or co-workers (including many early photos of Del Rio and her mother and husband shortly after they arrived in the United States), and photos that highlighted the wealth and status that Del Rio’s family held in Mexico. One such photo, for example, included a caption that indicated that Del Rio was wearing a hat that once had belonged to the infamous Mexican

revolutionary Pancho Villa. The elite status (and thus symbolic whiteness) of her family, to have ownership of an artifact related to a Mexican folk hero, can be read between the lines in this publicity.

The promotional texts that comprised Del Rio's nascent star image also included countless publicity photographs disseminated to women's magazines and the fashion pages of daily newspapers, in which Del Rio is utilized as a fashion mannequin. While this was to become a common tactic for publicizing both starlets and new fashion designs by the early 1930s, it became particularly associated with Del Rio as her career progressed, such that she was viewed as always in the height of haute couture fashion—or in a more negative light, as merely a beautiful mannequin. For example, Del Rio might be pictured in Spanish lace, the latest French wrap, or in a modern dress.

In general, Del Rio is posed in a non-sexualized manner with connotations of agency in these photos, looking directly into the camera. As these photos illustrate, Del Rio was not constrained by historical tropes regarding the Latina body in this early star promotion, being positioned instead as a generic foreigner. In addition, many of the outfits she wore were quite flamboyant, some even what might be termed ethnic performative drag. One such example is a 1927 publicity photograph in which Del Rio appeared in elaborate Orientalist garb. As Michael Rogin has argued with respect to Irish and Jewish performers utilizing blackface performance in the construction of their whiteness in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, so, I would argue, Del Rio's handlers, quite possibly without realizing they were doing so, worked to shore up her whiteness through such ethnic performance.

As was the case with respect to other female stars of the era, the physical image of and star discourse surrounding Del Rio also served to recruit female audience members to a new role of personal consumer, particularly of the increasingly commodified industries of fashion and makeup. Del Rio spoke

avidly in interviews about the pleasure she got out of her own role as a consumer, and was photographed with, among other things, her shoe collection and her impressive perfume collection.

Through photos and discourse in this period, moreover, Dolores Del Rio also was established as a “natural” beauty (with little emphasis placed on her body, however). One of the main tactics in these efforts appears to be discussion and images that emphasized that Del Rio had not bobbed her hair, did not wear her skirt hems above her knees, and did not wear excessive makeup. In several 1928 publicity photos, for example, Del Rio’s long hair is featured prominently. Del Rio in this manner was set up as a holdout against the brash New Woman of the times, another way in which as a Latina she was given credibility and status in Hollywood star system and American popular culture.

Together, these discourses and texts, as well as of course Del Rio’s performance of this star image at public appearances, served to shore up Del Rio as an impeccably high-class, educated woman and thus to “whiten” her image in the American imagination. This strategy becomes more apparent when Del Rio’s early publicity is compared to that of Lupe Vélez, who came from a less privileged background and whose public volatility at times appears to have been a polar opposite of Del Rio’s studied gentility. Rodríguez-Estrada argues in comparing the publicity that Del Rio and Velez received that the actresses’ class backgrounds and reported personalities had a great influence on their subsequent, divergent images and careers, with Del Rio benefiting from her elegant and “non-ethnic” image and Vélez in turn limited by being labeled ethnic.

As a result of these promotional efforts, Dolores Del Rio was established both as a star and as a Hollywood film actress by 1927. Del Rio worked under Carewe’s tutelage in a number of films released by United Artists and also was loaned to Fox Film for other films that year. She was even “confident enough to

turn down a lead opposite Douglas Fairbanks, Snr, [sic] which gave her compatriot, Lupe Velez, her break in *The Gaucho* in 1927” (Braun 35).

That year she instead appeared in two hit films, one a Carewe-helmed adaptation of Leo Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, a melodrama about a Russian peasant girl forced to turn to prostitution after an affair with a married man ends unhappily. This was the first of Del Rio’s films to be produced by Carewe for ArtCinema and released by ArtCinema’s parent company, United Artists. The film was publicized in a manner suitable to assure box office success: While Rod LaRoque is obviously the top draw, the publicity photos prominently featured Del Rio and LaRoque in a romantic embrace.

*Resurrection* was quite successful, helping to establish Del Rio’s status in Hollywood. *Variety* acknowledged Del Rio’s growing star power as a “potent” box office draw in its May 18, 1927 review of the film. Del Rio also began to be recognized for her acting abilities, as opposed to merely her beauty. Adela Rogers St. Johns asserted in *Photoplay* that “[i]n ‘Resurrection’ [Dolores Del Rio] upset all predictions by some of the best acting that has flashed across the screen” (4).

Reviews for another of Del Rio’s 1927 films, the Raoul Walsh-helmed *The Loves of Carmen* for Fox Film, were even more positive. According to David Robinson, Del Rio rose to the status of one of the most popular film actresses in Hollywood due to the success of this film (162). Publicity posters capitalized on Del Rio’s status as a star; her image and name dominated film posters, while co-star Victor McLaglen was second-billed. Del Rio’s passionate portrayal of the amorous Spanish heiress impressed critics with its erotic appeal, reviews reveal. Fox also apparently was counting on its success as a romantic tale, as the studio released the film in lavender tinting.

Promotional posters emphasized Del Rio as Carmen, giving in to irresistible passion; in most of the posters Del Rio’s Carmen is viewed in a full

body shot, locked in a torrid embrace. Fox publicists also emphasized the sensational aspects of the story by describing *Loves* in its promotional materials as “a gripping story of a woman’s passion, elemental, all-conquering” (*Photoplay*, Nov. 1927, 9). One advertisement for the film consisted of a collage of photos of Del Rio as Carmen, in romantic clinches with several different male co-stars.

Del Rio scored in the highly passionate role with both audiences and critics. “Sid.,” writing for *Variety*, raved that *Loves of Carmen* contained “plenty of hell, sex and box office.” He felt that Del Rio in particular made an erotic splash in the film, adding, “that explosive power is going to clear a path to the box office.... The basic tale is recognizable if double exposed behind the flashing bare legs of Dolores” (Sept. 28, 1927). *Photoplay* also emphasized Del Rio’s looks and sex appeal in its description of her portrayal of “the raven-haired, olive-skinned sinuous-limbed Carmen” (July 1927, 69). Ethnic comparisons were made by a number of reviewers, namely that Del Rio was particularly suited to play Carmen because of her nationality and thus supposedly natural fiery temperament.

Despite the obvious appeal that Del Rio held for audiences in such a sexy and body-exposing role, care was taken to otherwise maintain her image as an elegant and high-minded woman. Negotiations behind the scenes illustrate the variety of agendas at stake in the shaping of a star’s image in a film production. In correspondence between Carewe and Fox executives at the time of the making of *Loves*, Carewe reminded that Del Rio was “subject to [his] direction in all manners concerning script, representation, and costuming” and that he would object if she were asked to do anything in a role that might be considered “obscene or lewd or which might reflect upon her reputation, character, and religious or social standing.”<sup>12</sup> Del Rio herself also was apparently aware of the delicacy of the role of Carmen with respect to her star image. On at least one

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<sup>12</sup> Edwin Carewe to Sol Wurtzel, November 7, 1927. Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California.



occasion Del Rio contacted a Fox executive, Winfield Sheehan, in writing to contest how her character was shot in the film, concerned that too much of her skin was showing, and asked that scenes be removed.

While this correspondence highlights Del Rio's awareness of the importance of the marketability of her image and her agency in the construction of this image, Carewe's comments perhaps have even more import. They highlight the status of Del Rio-as-star as a carefully packaged product, such that her performances were not fully her own but the rather the culmination of the work of her director, publicist, and others involved in her career and films, with this being the case as early as the pre-sound era of the late 1920s. Such deterministic dynamics are important to remember with respect to the construction of Del Rio's subsequent career and star image, and that of Latina stars in the decades since.

#### **AN IMPOSSIBLE CROSSOVER? DEL RIO AND THE RISE OF THE TALKIE**

He can sing and play the guitar, but what about his accent? (An MGM executive, speaking about the career possibilities for Ramon Novarro in sound film, Marion 182).

Del Rio's career was soon to weather an unexpected turn, as Warner Bros.' 1927 release of *The Jazz Singer* had by now convinced Hollywood studios that talkies were the wave of the future. Bodeen asserts that Del Rio began diligently working on her English in preparation for the upcoming industry transition. The outcome of her upcoming film projects had become an unknown quantity.

Del Rio's stardom was still to peak, in fact. Dolores Del Rio's filmography confirms that her Hollywood career crested in 1928 with respect to the number of film projects that she starred in and the variety of roles she played. In 1928, Del Rio starred in six films. Of these, two were silent films; three were

“soundies,” with synchronized musical scores, but no singing or talking; and one was a partial talkie in which she sang a few songs. Exploration of these films and Del Rio’s promotion in relation to each reveals a great deal about industrial shifts that had an impact on Latina and Latino stars in this time period.

The silent films consisted of Fox Film’s Western *Gateway of the Moon*, in which Del Rio plays a “half-caste” Indian woman, and the low-budget release *No Other Woman*, in which Del Rio plays a character by the name of Carmelita Desano.<sup>13</sup> In the films with musical scores, she plays a wide range of European nationalities in the melodramatic formula that previously had appealed to many film fans. These roles included a Jewish prospector’s granddaughter in MGM’s adventure film *The Trail of ’98* (dir. Clarence Brown), about the hardships faced by prospectors in Alaska, which was a moderate success with critics; a Russian woman who becomes a prostitute after being abandoned by her lover, the prince, in *The Red Dance* (dir. Raoul Walsh); and an “untamable” Gypsy bear tamer in Edwin Carewe’s *Revenge*. Del Rio also appeared in an early sound film in which she sang a few songs, *Ramona* (dir. Carewe), which will be discussed further below.

Del Rio’s last silent film, *Revenge*, was a melodrama released by United Artists. Publicity for the film depicted Del Rio at the height of her status in Hollywood, though this status was soon to change. Publicity stills and film posters are dominated by Del Rio’s photo and highlight her physicality and dark beauty. It’s apparent from these promotional materials that Del Rio had convinced film producers of her solid “box office” at this stage in her career; the content of her films apparently made little difference to her fans, who would come to the theaters to see anything she appeared in. With the pending death knell for the melodrama and the silent film, however, this perception was soon to change.

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<sup>13</sup> *No Other Woman* actually had been shot in 1926 and shelved, but was released by Fox when *Loves of Carmen* became a big hit.

Despite the fact that *Revenge* was of the quality of many successful melodramas of earlier years in many respects, the film was rated “just fair” by *Variety*. The reviewer asserted that “the title and star will save it from mediocrity at the box office for the first few days of a booking” (Dec. 12, 1928). But the mention of mediocrity was likely a sign of changing public tastes in melodrama.

In spite of the active year and popularity that Dolores Del Rio experienced in 1928, her situation in Hollywood was already shifting. Del Rio, notably, while already acting in “sound” films, was not encouraged, similarly to other popular Latino stars of the period, to quickly star in talkies. The above Francis Marion quote concerning the situation for Ramon Novarro at the time is illustrative of the types of behind-the-scenes discussions that were taking place at every studio with respect to which actors were going to successfully make the leap to the new world of sound film. It can be speculated that discussions of the career options of other Hollywood Latinos also took place, although for the most part these discussions have not been recorded for the historical record. Allen R. Ellenberger, in his biographical study of Ramon Novarro, found documentation of such a meeting that took place at MGM. Lewis Stone, Lionel Barrymore, and Conrad Nagel were given the go-ahead to quickly begin working in talkies, while Ramon Novarro apparently was not (83).

With respect to Dolores Del Rio in particular, some scholars assert that she was able to transition to sound film without mishap. Hershfield, while acknowledging that Del Rio’s Mexican accent “underscored her visible appearance as a ‘foreigner,’ asserts that Del Rio was able to “weather” the transition to sound film (18). Bodeen argues as well that Dolores Del Rio “proved [in her first talkie that] her English was understandable, her voice, interesting, and that a career for her in talking pictures was feasible” (284). I found the most evidence, however, for the argument of several other scholars,

including López, that Del Rio's Latin accent brought about the waning and eventual demise of her Hollywood film career after the transition to sound.

This debate may in part rest on semantics; undoubtedly it could be said that Del Rio weathered the transition, because she continued to appear fairly steadily in English-language films in the 1930s and early 1940s. If the question is one of her status in Hollywood, however, it can be strongly argued that Del Rio never experienced the level of stardom and opportunity that she had at her career peak after motion pictures began to talk. The distinction between "sound" film and "talkies" also is extremely important to keep in mind in exploring the impact of talking (as opposed to musical) film on Del Rio's career.

One marker of Del Rio's success prior to the industry's conversion of sound film was her inclusion on March 29, 1928, with the "[t]he most famous, the highest paid names in American motion pictures," a small group of film stars under contract with United Artists, in a pioneering radio broadcast. This broadcast to the American public was to "prove to millions of fans that their idols had voices ... good enough to meet the challenge of the talkies" (Walker 1, 211). According to Walker, Del Rio joined other United Artists stars Mary Pickford, Pickford's husband Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., Charlie Chaplin, D.W. Griffith, John Barrymore, Norma Talmadge, and Gloria Swanson in this endeavor and sang a song from *Ramona* as her contribution. Walker documents that after this historic radio broadcast, news reports were soon rife with rumors of substitute voice "dubblers" being used, however, particularly for the female stars. It was suspected that a professional singer had sung the lyric for Del Rio, and that someone else had given Norma Talmadge's fashion chat for her (3). The rumor regarding Del Rio's singing was soon proved untrue, Walker asserts.

As was also the case for Novarro, Del Rio's first talkies were actually musicals. *Ramona*, for example, featured a Movietone musical score and marked Del Rio's singing debut on film. *Ramona*, an oft-told, ambivalent tale of racial

mixing and misunderstanding, centers on a romance between a half-Indian girl (also of Californio Mexican and so presumably of Spanish descent) and an Indian man in California of the *ranchero* era. It was adapted from an 1884 best-selling novel by Helen Hunt Jackson and in fact had been made into a Hollywood film twice before this particular version in which Del Rio starred.<sup>14</sup>

It is particularly interesting that as Dolores Del Rio's ethnic status in Hollywood had come into question with the addition of her accent in her film performances, that it had been decided that she would star in this film that focused heavily on *mestizaje* (in this case, cultural miscegenation) and the narrative question of what it means to be American (Browder 77). Moreover, reviewers, in praising Dolores Del Rio's acting in the role, tended to confuse "'Indianness' with 'Mexicanness,'" as Hershfield points out (15). *Photoplay*, for example, asserted that "there could have been no more fitting person to impersonate the Indian-blooded Ramona than the Mexican Dolores Del Rio" (March 1928, 52).

Despite an accent that some found heavy (according to López, it was "thick and her English almost unintelligible" ["From Hollywood" 13]), *Ramona* proved to be another success that ensured Del Rio's status in Hollywood for a while. The film's songs also were quite popular, particularly the title song, which "was credited with helping the film to a large part of its 1,500,000 dollar gross" (Walker 82). While the film solidified Del Rio's stardom, it may also have served as a symbolic marker, however, of the Mexican-born actress's subsequent status in Hollywood as always, not quite American.

Del Rio also sang a few songs and spoke a few words the following year in the tearjerker *Evangeline* (1929), the last film in which she was directed by Carewe. A part-talkie that appears to have been initially designed as a silent film,

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<sup>14</sup> The novel was "not only a national best-seller but a national institution," Laura Browder documents (92). It became so popular over the next decades that it was reprinted over three hundred times (Browder, citing Carlyle Channing Davis, 92).

the film includes a sound score and several songs.<sup>15</sup> In the film, Del Rio acted in the title role of Evangeline, an Acadian woman separated from her betrothed who then searches for him for years,<sup>16</sup> only to finally find him on his deathbed.

The promotion of *Evangeline*, also a United Artists release, hearkens back to that of Del Rio's earlier films made under Carewe's direction: Photos of the romantic couple in close-up in a passionate clinch dominate. Del Rio's acting in the film as well is a throwback to her earlier years as a silent film star; much of the narrative is told through Del Rio's expressive (some would say, at times overly expressive) face in close-up and emotive bodily movements. Her accent is difficult to discern, given that for the most part she is only heard singing, in a fairly operatic fashion. It appears from reviews of the film that Del Rio is in fact supplying her own voice, but it is impossible to verify this.

The limitations that Latinas were beginning to face in an increasingly racialized Hollywood quickly are evident in Del Rio's publicity, however. In a September 1929 *Vanity Fair* article while the film was in production, the magazine stated that in taking the role of the "Nordic heroine," Del Rio was undertaking a "hazardous" task, "for *Evangeline* is an **American** tradition, but one which *Senora* [sic] Del Rio's undoubted talent should make her understand" (77).

Reviews of Del Rio's performance in the film were mixed as well, intimating the rapidly changing status of Latinos within the Hollywood imaginary once they could be heard at the beginning of the 1930s. Del Rio's voice and accent, and whether she was providing her own voice or merely lipsynching, apparently were the subject of scrutiny on the part of critics and (and thus

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<sup>15</sup> Only two of Del Rio's songs survive on the commercially available DVD for *Evangeline*, however.

<sup>16</sup> Based on Longfellow's poem of the same name. The Acadians, living in a region that was formerly part of Nova Scotia, were torn between the English and French in the First World War and forcibly taken from the land. Eventually many Acadians were sent to the U.S., where a large community settled in Louisiana.

presumably, audiences). According to Bodeen, the film “proved her English was understandable, her voice, interesting, and that a career for her in talking pictures was feasible” (284), while *Film Daily* described Del Rio’s voice as “small” but “charming” (August 4, 1929). *Variety*, while commenting that the film included several “admirable song numbers,” also proffered that it appeared the Del Rio and the other singer (actor Roland Drew) were actually singing, as they were often “shown in closeups.” Del Rio was not rated so highly with respect to verisimilitude. Whether this was a critique of her acting, her appearance, or her accent is somewhat unclear, however. According to *Variety*, “The paprika Latina girl has some good emotional sequences, but somehow doesn’t seem to fit her role” (July 31, 1929).

In the meantime, Del Rio experienced some personal difficulties and rare bad publicity. Her separation and divorce from husband Jaime Del Rio, and his later death from illness in Berlin in December 1928, put a momentary damper on her image. Ruth Waterbury, writing for *Photoplay*, even led a story on the perils of “going Hollywood” with the story of Del Rio’s betrayal of her husband as a result of Hollywood turning her head. “[I]n Hollywood love is a bauble to be retained as long as usable and then to be scrapped when it gets in the way of either ambition or pleasure,” the copy read. “The case of Jaime and Dolores Del Rio is a perfect example” (Feb. 1928, 30). According to several accounts, she had been romantically involved with Edwin Carewe (who divorced his wife around this point in time), but separated from him after the filming of *Evangeline*. In 1930, Carewe returned to his ex-wife and Del Rio married Cedric Gibbons, art director for MGM.

In attempt to work her Spanish accent into a role, Del Rio’s first “all talkie” was in the role of a Spanish singer, Lita, who works in a French brothel but will not succumb to temptation, in the drama *The Bad One* (1930), directed by George Fitzmaurice for United Artists. She was not well received for her work in

this picture. According to *Variety*, “The ‘Bad One’ is just that for Dolores Del Rio. She is miscast; she poses and is artificial” (June 18, 1930). Ironically, Lita’s awkward efforts to learn American slang in the film can be seen as an emblem of Del Rio’s efforts to be seen as an American voice in the Hollywood star system at the time. With respect to this film at least, Del Rio was not embraced. Her character’s accent was criticized by *Variety*, which stated, “Lita’s gradual efforts to simulate American slang are painfully self-conscious, rather than even suggestive of cuteness” (June 18, 1930). It is not possible to disentangle this critique from what likely was also a criticism of Del Rio’s own non-native accent.

Del Rio broke her management contract with Edwin Carewe after this film and signed with Joseph Schenck at United Artists, then suffered what apparently was a nervous breakdown that kept her from fulfilling the contract (Reyes and Rubie, Braun). The United Artists contract, which stipulated that it would become null if she didn’t work over a month-long period, was cancelled in 1931. In one of the few comments Del Rio has made about that time, she stated: “Things crashed around me [during that period]. Tragic, terrifying things. I lived in a hotbed of intrigue, of politics, of lies and malice, of cross currents of human purposes. I was hurt so often, I was afraid to express myself!” (qtd. in Bodeen 285-286). Perhaps there are some clues about the changing climate toward Latino and Latina actors in Hollywood in Del Rio’s ambiguous but passionate statement.

It is not known if Del Rio continued with dialect coaching during her time away from the cameras, though it is likely. What is known is that while Del Rio was away, some important transformations were in motion in Hollywood. For one, the Hollywood star system was undergoing rapid changes. One illustration could be seen in *Photoplay*’s new column, “These New Faces,” which was devoted to introducing new actors being brought in from the New York stage. To a rule, a survey of the appearance and names of these new actors indicates that virtually all were “all-American” in both respects. Dominating the screen now



were leading ladies of a different, more streetwise style, “screen ladies like Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Bette Davis, Ruth Chatterton and Jean Harlow, whose voices contributed so much to defining their roles as worldly women of the 1930s” (Walker 203).

Publicity photographs of the WAMPAS Baby Stars of 1934 serve as another illustration of changing beauty norms in the U.S. popular culture at the time. No longer were the starlets mostly brunette, as was the case during Dolores Del Rio’s tenure as a Baby Star in 1926; the lineup now was dominated by blondes and other WASP-ish beauties. Del Rio was no longer in vogue as a dark beauty and was pigeonholed in Latin roles beginning at this time, when Mexican, no matter how Spanish in origin, no longer easily translated as glamorous and cosmopolitan.

#### **THE EARLY THIRTIES: LITTLE ROOM TO MOVE “SOUTH OF THE EQUATOR”**

The thirties brought decreasing options for Dolores Del Rio, although she was able to bank on her former stardom for a time and thus continued to be cast in films. In 1931, Del Rio negotiated a new contract, this time with RKO Radio Pictures, then led by David O. Selznick. Over the next few years she starred in several RKO films, many of which were Latin musicals. As I describe further below, Del Rio’s roles and related publicity increasingly revealed the lack of mobility that Latinos experienced in Hollywood in this period.

The first of the films Del Rio starred in for RKO was *Girl of the Rio* (1932). Considering Del Rio’s newly ambiguous status in Hollywood, *Girl of the Rio*, RKO’s remake of the film *The Dove* (which had been boycotted by the Mexican government for what it considered negative representations of Mexican characters), is particularly telling. In this film, Del Rio plays cantina singer Dolores Romero in a Mexican border town; the other Mexican characters generally have no redeeming qualities. Del Rio appears to be struggling in the

role, either with its apparent limitations or the new, subtler talkie-style of acting, or both. Her actual accent is difficult to discern in the film, as much of her character's dialogue calls for her to speak broken English. The character's trademark saying throughout, in fact, is the embarrassing phrase, "You betcha your life!" *Variety* ultimately panned Del Rio for what it called an "indifferent performance" in the film (Jan. 12, 1932).

The tactic of launching foreign actors' talkie careers in the roles of foreigners with imperfect English was in fact utilized by the major studios many times in the early part of the decade. As Ellenberger argues with respect to the post-sound film career of Ramon Novarro, "[w]ith his accent, [Novarro] was limited to foreign characters" (103). Greta Garbo's first talking role in *Anna Christie* (1930) (promoted with the now-famous tag line, "Garbo talks!") also is a prime example. This approach seems to have been more successful for Garbo than for Del Rio, Novarro, and other Latino actors, however, considering their subsequent career trajectories. Perhaps this was because Garbo was considered more easily definable as white and thus even as a foreigner, closer to the American ideal.

At the time Del Rio still maintained an enthusiastic Latino audience and in particular a strong relationship with the Los Angeles Mexican American community. She was known to perform at benefits that supported the community, including one for Mexican earthquake victims in May 1931 and a benefit for victims of a violent Tampico storm in September 1933. Her commitment became increasingly important as the Depression and related repatriation hit the community hard. Mexican Americans, in turn, embraced La Dolores. She was described as "nuestra estrella máxima de la pantalla" (our biggest star....) by *La Opinión* and often simply as *Nuestra Dolores* by individuals, a term of endearment that carried over to her transition to Mexican cinema, as Hershfield indicates.

By 1932, the industry had for the most part converted completely to talkies. In the public eye, Del Rio still had a star image of a high-class, tasteful lady, with a well respected art director husband, but her stardom as a talking actress did not equal to her former status. Del Rio's career was resuscitated somewhat by the splash she made in RKO's South Sea romance *Bird of Paradise* (1932 dir. King Vidor), in which she played the Polynesian island princess Luana. The story of Luana's forbidden love with Johnny, an American sailor, the film heavily exploits the titillation of a modern colonialist take on interracial island love. Del Rio's role offered her little to do other than lust for Johnny and speak in a gibberish meant to pass for a Polynesian language.

Del Rio was positioned as an erotic ethnic in the film through the sensational storyline and exploitation-style advertising. Regarding the storyline, Selznick told director King Vidor: "I don't care what story you use as long as we call it *Bird of Paradise* and Del Rio jumps into a flaming volcano at the finish" (*Bird of Paradise* DVD). The film advertising in turn emphasized the racy storyline, potential nudity, and sexual content. For example, one promotional poster showed a nearly half-naked Del Rio, a flowery lei strategically placed on her torso, in a clinch with Joel McCrea, accompanied by the copy, "glamorous drama of lovers whose worlds were a million miles apart, but whose hearts throbbed together!" and "White man... native girl... two hearts in a flowery paradise!"

Although Del Rio's positioning as an exotic Other within the film's diegesis is consistent, her positioning with respect to whiteness is contradictory. In the film she sports the softer look of the era. Like other film stars, Del Rio now wore her hair in a fashionable shoulder-length bob, natural-looking makeup and thin, arched eyebrows. Great pains, moreover, were taken to highlight Del Rio's fair skin and thus beauty in comparison to other women portraying natives

on the island, who seem to have been cast uniformly based on their dark skin and indigenous features.

The positioning of Latina stars within the racialized Hollywood paradigm in the early sound era begins to become illuminated in this process. This position was at best one of lesser whiteness or ethnic ambiguity, and always demarcated as distinct from white femininity. As Hershfield states, Del Rio “could not occupy exactly the *same* narrative and visual space as foreign ‘white’ actresses of the thirties such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich” (18). The role of Luana, the exceptional non-white beauty, offered Del Rio such a simultaneously marginal and exalted space. Her character is imbued with both a relative whiteness in relation to the islanders and a lesser whiteness *vis-à-vis* the Hollywood beauty ideal.

While notions of titillating interracial love were exploited in the production and marketing of the film, filmmakers did have to please the censors in order to release the film. The ultimate sacrifice Luana makes of her life in order to save Johnny, preventing true miscegenation—procreation—appears to have convinced the censors that many other, explicitly sexual scenes could remain in the film. Interestingly, the Hayes Office expressed no concern regarding Del Rio’s portrayal of Luana. A review of the correspondence between the production team and the censorship office indicates that while nudity and sexual suggestiveness in the film had to be toned down to please the MPAA, the interracial aspect of the romance apparently was not considered problematic. Nor was mention made of Del Rio’s ethnicity; she apparently was considered white or “white enough” by the Hayes Office, such that the ban on miscegenation was no concern.

Del Rio received praise both for her acting and for her beauty in the role. Interestingly, although Del Rio had successfully played roles of widely diverse European and non-European ethnicities in the past, now reviewers commented

that she was particularly suited to play this Polynesian role because of her Latin ethnicity. According to *Variety*, the film's "greatest asset is the truly fine performance of Dolores Del Rio as the savage princess Luana, a role made to order for this electric young Mexican" (September 13, 1932). "Rush.," the reviewer from *Variety*, trumpeted the pleasures of Del Rio's beauty and partial nudity in the film, stating, "Miss Del Rio's version of the stimulating South Seas calisthenics will be the subject of much talk hither and yon." (September 13, 1932).

Despite the praise the film received, it didn't earn enough to turn a profit, however, considering its large production budget. Some of Del Rio's publicity that followed appeared meant to perform a type of damage control with respect to the film's poor box office take. In a September 1932 *Photoplay* article titled "What Price Stardom?" and subtitled "[b]eing stamped a 'million dollar baby' has almost cost Dolores Del Rio her career," Evaline Lieber argued that too much had been expected of Del Rio with respect to *Bird of Paradise*, a film that was so expensive to make that no actor could be expected to draw enough of an audience to recoup a profit.

Del Rio continued to be lauded for her looks and figure throughout the 1930s. In just one such example, she was named the "most perfect feminine figure in Hollywood" in *Photoplay* in 1933, supposedly the "unanimous choice" of a panel of judges that included "medical men, artists, [and] designers" (Feb. 1933, 74). Del Rio at this stage had slimmed down to the point of being described in her press at times as "fragile," all of which served to emphasize her fine bone structure, which came to be her trademark.

Meanwhile, Del Rio was struggling to even be considered by casting directors for A-list roles. The actress found the most opportunity at this stage in her career in Hollywood's Latin musicals, her dancing ability again paying off. She acted in several musicals for RKO and had a surprise hit in her first, *Flying*

*Down To Rio* (1933, dir. Thornton Freeland), in which she played a Brazilian heiress who falls for an American band leader. While Del Rio received some positive reviews for her portrayal of the aristocratic and irresistible Belinha de Rezende, most critics agree that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, paired for the first time on film, stole the film from leads Del Rio and Gene Raymond.

The role of Belinha aptly illustrates the Dark Lady motif that came to dominate Del Rio's star image at this stage in her career. Belinha is elegant and coy, but underneath this facade, the promise of passion smolders. She exerts an irresistible magnetism that at least some American men cannot resist. Upon merely a few glances from her dark eyes, Roger Bond (Raymond) is irreducibly in love. Others, such as Fred Astaire's character of Fred Ayres, realize Belinha is merely another "Latin type," however.

While not directly obvious, Belinha as an example of a Dark Lady is in fact a variation of the inviting Latina body, with both the invitation and the body in question submerged but powerful presences. There are implications that what lies beneath her elaborately flouncy clothes is particularly hot to handle, something that white women cannot possibly offer. Bitter about Belinha's ease in eliciting the attention of men, one white woman complains, "What does she have that I don't south of the equator?" an ironic comment with respect to the (in this case, covert) sexualization of the Latina star body. While little attention is drawn directly to the character's body in the role—perhaps in part because of the strict dictates of the Production Code—a great deal of attention is indirectly drawn to it through such double entendres throughout the film. Belinha is further constructed merely as an inviting body because her narrative is ultimately overshadowed by that of the "American" couple played by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

The numerous promotional posters that RKO used to advertise the film are particularly telling in regard to the ambiguity that came to characterize Del Rio's status in Hollywood at this time. In the posters, while Del Rio's name is

prominently featured, her image is creatively buried or overshadowed by “whiter” female bodies. For example, in one poster an anonymous, very white dancer dominates the picture while Del Rio’s visage is nowhere to be seen. In another poster that almost falls into the camp of surrealist art due to its many disjointed images, an image of Del Rio and Raymond’s heads in an oddly framed lovers’ embrace are placed only in the lower right hand corner, a weak positioning in relation to the four quadrants of the poster. Because of the unusual framing they almost appear to be lying down, while white female dancers are busy and active in the rest of the poster frame. In either case, the images can be interpreted to symbolically express that Del Rio as a Latina needed to move aside to make room for the “real players” to take their rightful place center stage in the new Hollywood of the mid-1930s.

But Dolores Del Rio, for the most part, was optimistic, at least for the short term, about the direction her film career was taking. Del Rio hoped that the fact that she was playing a high-class character in fine clothes in *Flying* rather than a native girl meant that her opportunities were on an upswing. In an interview published in *Film Weekly* in July 1932, Del Rio is quoted as saying, “For the first time I was to play the part of a smart modern woman with plenty of music and comedy around me. I knew it was a sign I could play a sophisticated role. I was no longer little Luana or Ramona” (456).

Del Rio’s optimism did not take her far, however. After the release of *Flying Down to Rio*, RKO chose not to renew Del Rio’s contract. She instead signed with Warner Bros. in 1934. Under her contract with the studio, Del Rio acted in roles in other musicals that appear quite similar to those in which she had appeared previously. Her costumes and publicity in particular echoed that of the prior few years. Her film image came to be dominated by coolly flamboyant Latin dance costumes, whether ruffled, sequenced, or feathered.

The first of these Latin-themed musicals and respective set of costumes was *Wonder Bar* (1934, dir. Lloyd Bacon), in which Del Rio played Latin dancer Inez. In this role, the inviting Latina body again serves as a key but submerged aspect of Del Rio's portrayal. Inez is the object of the romantic and sexual fantasies of two men in her life, portrayed by Al Jolson and Dick Powell, with this love and lust presented as a given based in large part on her irresistible appearance and dynamic magnetism.

A publicity still from *Wonder Bar* of Del Rio as Inez dancing with co-star Ricardo Cortez is an example of how she had begun to be utilized in her films primarily as a shiny “*objet d’art*,” as David Ragan argues (46). Del Rio's dance costume in this instance was dominated by a dramatic feather boa. Del Rio likely was referring to these consistent limitations when she described to interviewers in later decades how her acting came to be overshadowed by “so many feathers” in these years. According to the RKO Publicity Department in 1943, “[t]here came a realization on the part of movie makers that no one could wear clothes like DDR, so that’s what she did, to the exclusion of roles with the concomitant requisite of ability.” Del Rio elaborated in her RKO biography that her career had been built on gritty roles, and that in contrast, “when they give you wonderful clothes, they give you bad parts” (Publicity Dept., RKO Radio Pictures). By the mid-1930s the “gritty” Hollywood roles were instead going to such actresses as Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Barbara Stanwyck.

Still attempting to salvage her career, the following year Del Rio appeared in two more Latin musicals for Warner, *In Caliente* (dir. Lloyd Bacon) and *I Live for Love* (dir. Busby Berkeley). Del Rio garnered positive reviews, but critics’ comments ultimately were far less effusive than those of years’ past, such as was the case in this review for *I Live for Love* from *Variety*: “Del Rio gives a nice performance and has been well photographed” (Oct. 23, 1935).



With respect to Del Rio's star image at the time, she evolved into an even more glamorous, cool clotheshorse at this stage of her career. Her image in fact takes on an icy, untouchable distance and elegance in her publicity photographs. Star photographer Elmer Fryer shot most of Del Rio's photos for Warner Bros, thus playing a large role in the shaping of her image at this point in time. Each studio had their own take on Del Rio-as-mannequin. In the case of the publicity photographs shot while she was a player for Warner Bros, the stills have an eerie, lifeless quality and chiaroscuro lighting. Never smiling, Del Rio appears to have lost all animation and agency in the stills, literally to have fallen into suspended animation as she was suspended in particular types of film roles.

Warner's remake of the historical sex farce *Madame Dubarry* (1934, dir. William Dieterle), provided Del Rio with a potential change, a part in which she could actually show her acting range again, but it too proved a disappointment. Eventually it was cut drastically by the Hays Office after the shoring up of the newly enforced Production Code, according to Del Rio (Braun). It also was not a financial success, though Del Rio considered it her best film for Warner Bros.

While Del Rio continued acting in a few films in the late 1930s, her career was in noticeable decline after 1934. With changing political tides in the country, Del Rio's Mexican nationality increasingly appeared to be an obstacle to furthering her career. Del Rio temporarily was accused of involvement with the Communist party, in August 1934, perhaps a sign of increasing xenophobia against Mexicans during the Depression. At that time, the names of Lupe Vélez, Dolores Del Rio, and Ramon Novarro apparently had been found in a police raid at the Communist headquarters in Sacramento (Ellenberger 130). Del Rio hotly denied the accusations, as did Velez and Novarro. The district attorney later chose not to subpoena any of the stars.

Ultimately, however, it was social, rather than directly political shifts that put a damper on Del Rio's career. Audiences were looking for a radically

different sort of star than had been the rage in the late 1920s, such that Del Rio no longer captured the predominant American imagination in the same way. Dolores Del Rio herself is quoted as saying, “By the mid-1930s ... there were a new set of fresh faces, and the really plum roles were going to actresses like Bette Davis or Katherine Hepburn or Barbara Stanwyck” (Hadley-Garcia 5).

Following a few other films for Warner Bros. that didn’t register highly with audiences, Del Rio and the studio had difficulties coming to agreement during contract negotiations in 1936. Del Rio finally chose to sign with Columbia Pictures later that year. Del Rio made just one film, *Devil’s Playground*, for Columbia. In this film she again played a Mexican dancer and femme fatale. Columbia’s publicity for the film included a by-now tradition of commissioning a series of promotional photographs of Del Rio in a massive number of high fashion get-ups. Del Rio broke her contract and returned to Fox in 1937. Her films for Fox included a role as herself in *Ali Baba Goes to Town* (1937, dir. David Butler), as Dolores Daria in *Lancer Spy* (1937, dir. Gregory Ratoff), and as a French singer in *International Settlement* (dir. Eugene Ford).

By 1938 she was not able to land lead roles, according to Del Rio. Her personal life also was increasingly unstable; she had had an affair with Hollywood upstart Orson Welles in the late 1930s and divorced second husband Cedric Gibbons as a result of it. Because of disappointment over a collaboration with Welles, *Journey Into Fear* (1942), and the end of their relationship, Del Rio left Hollywood to work in the Mexican film industry.

“I didn’t want to be a star anymore. I wanted to be an actress and with all those gowns they put on me, all of those millions of feathers, I couldn’t be. I chose instead the chance to be a pioneer in the movie industry in my country, an exciting new challenge,” she recounted to *Variety* a few years before her death in 1983 (October 15, 1981). She moved back to Mexico City and a few short years later was the reigning queen of Mexican cinema, a position she held (or rather

shared with Maria Félix) for the rest of her life. As such she played a highly visible role in Mexican cinema's heralded "Golden Age." Among her many accolades during this period, she won the Mexican equivalent of an Academy Award for Best Actress, the Ariele, three times during her highly lauded Mexican career, for *Flor Silvestre* in 1944, for *Doña Perfecta* in 1951, and for *The Boy and the Fog* in 1953. She later married for a third time, to Lewis Riley in 1959. Del Rio made a few, brief forays back to Hollywood to act in such films as *Flaming Star* in 1960 and *Cheyenne Autumn* in 1964 and was cited both as a talented actresses and gracefully aging beauty. Dolores Del Rio died in Newport Beach, California, in 1983.

## CONCLUSIONS

As I document in this chapter, the late silent film era of the mid-to-late 1920s provided an opening for Latino and Latina stardom that only recently have signs of beginning to be matched. This era provided unique opportunity for a number of light-skinned Latinos in Hollywood, whose images were shaped to reflect their status as acceptably "white" stars. Such was the case for Del Rio in this time period.

Both aesthetic factors and deliberate star promotion efforts contributed to this whitening of Dolores Del Rio in her early public image. Her fair complexion and European features undoubtedly played into this construction. Del Rio also benefited from publicity that paired the actress with connotations of wealth and high-minded morality. Additionally, Del Rio's "sponsor," in the form of her well-connected manager/director, Edwin Carewe, arguably assisted greatly in this process early in Del Rio's career. Industrial factors played into this construction as well. For instance, Del Rio was assisted by the emphasis on visual contrasts in silent cinema, which tended to "assimilate ethnic minorities at the expense of racial ones," as Cohen argues (17).

Developments in the film industry and sociopolitical changes of the 1930s changed the nature of Hollywood film stardom for Latino and Latina stars and aspiring actors, however. As such, the primary question that was answered in the reshaping of Del Rio's star image and that of other Latinas with active careers in this period, was "How will we know who is Latina, and who is White?" The status that Dolores Del Rio achieved as an American star in the late 1920s thus was not possible after 1934 and notions of star appeal solidified in relation to what came to be established as a more "All-American" whiteness. Del Rio's career serves as apt illustration of this changing landscape.

As a part of this dynamic, Latina casting and star images underwent a dramatic shift. Increasingly, racialized notions played into a "racial politics of casting" in Hollywood that clearly designated white stars as dominant (Shohat and Stam 189). In the process, the voices and the bodies even of light-skinned Latina stars were inscribed in a manner that distinctly set them apart from whites in Hollywood. Such was the case for Del Rio, who began to experience obstructions to being cast in leading roles in Hollywood films even while she was celebrated for her unique beauty and body.

Within the newly imagined (and aural) racial hierarchy of the star system and story worlds of films of the 1930s and '40s, Latinos began to occupy a liminal, shadow space between the categories of whiteness and blackness, not fully equated with blackness nor fully allowed into the privileged realm of whiteness. Latinas such as Dolores Del Rio experienced more opportunities than African American actresses of the era such as Louise Beavers, who was confined to maid roles, and Fredi Washington, an extremely light-skinned actress who was allowed to portray a romantic lead only in black-cast films. A racializing process nevertheless began to insistently imbue Latino characters and stars with a "lesser whiteness" when they were inserted into white-dominant texts,

ensuring that they would not threaten the racialized status quo of studio era Hollywood.

This racialized caste system that limited opportunities for Latina stardom was constructed in four primary ways after the transition to sound film. These methods included an emphasis on exaggerated Spanish accents and the devaluation of the Spanish accent; the stressing of contrasts between Latina and particularly “white” (fair and blond) actors; the sexualization of Latina, and to a lesser extent, Latino bodies, albeit within the dictates of the Production Code; and the casting of Latinas *only* in Latina roles or in other ethnic roles. I discuss each of these in further detail below.

First, the primary element that “racialized” Dolores Del Rio and other Hollywood Latinos in the 1930s was that of accent. When voice undeniably marked a character’s ethnicity, regional ties, or class background, notions of an idealized American accent were not open to Spanish inflection, despite the long history of American-born Latinos in this country. Spanish accents began to be interpreted as comical or threatening, but always as different from the mainstream realm of the hero and heroine in the traditional Hollywood diegesis.

As the racialized star system was gradually reformulated in response to the inclusion of accent in star images, Latino actors and actresses, regardless of appearance, underwent an involuntary shift in their positioning in the American imaginary. Even while the inclusion of accent gave some African American actors opportunity (however minor, as scholars such as Donald Bogle attest) that they had not previously experienced, Latinos and Latinas were affected by being summarily categorized as non-white, often despite having fair skin and European features.

While Latinas had always been positioned as different from the white norm, after the transition to sound film, their constructed image no longer held the same appeal for audiences. Rather, their positioning as “lesser whites” now left

them in a one-down position. This was accomplished in part through casting and publicity choices that emphasized their contrast with particularly fair and/or blonde actresses, as was the case for Dolores Del Rio in *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) opposite male lead Gene Raymond and second female lead Ginger Rogers. This lead role in fact was one of the few starring roles that Del Rio was able to land in this time period. Concurrently, National standards of beauty began to privilege the ultra whiteness of blonds and Anglo-Saxon phenotypic features and body types, as can be evidenced through comparisons of female stars and beauty queens of the 1930s with those of a decade prior. Given these shifts, Dolores Del Rio, Lupe Vélez, and other Latinas in studio era Hollywood no longer had a chance to truly shine in the shadow of the “whiter” females with which they were paired.

In addition, Latinas began to be set apart from white actresses in Hollywood through their positioning as erotic others in film narratives. In this manner, sexuality increasingly was written on the Latina star body after the transition to sound film. As sexual puritanism became a prominent aspect of the construction of white femininity in Depression-era Hollywood, the Latina star body in contrast was often coded as inherently seductive. A strong element of this narrative paradigm, Latinas often were cast as singers and dancers in films of this era, such that “to-be-looked-at-ness” was often part and parcel of such constructions (Mulvey 33). In contrast, African American female characters often were seen as desexualized mammies and servants in this period, even further marginalized than Latina harlot and Dark Lady characters.

In the case of Del Rio, such narrative tendencies were tempered by a focus on her wealth and glamorous life in her extratextual publicity. This is particularly notable when her star image is compared with that of her contemporary Lupe Vélez, who was dogged by publicity that characterized her as a less-than-classy Latin spitfire throughout her career in Hollywood. Regardless

of her elegant star image, however, Del Rio was less and less able to escape the classic paradigms associated with Latina stardom in Hollywood as the studio era progressed.

As alluded to above, the changing status of Latinas in the studio era was tied as well to changes in casting patterns. It is important to note that during the earlier silent era, Dolores Del Rio generally played characters of diverse nationalities, excluding Latino. As a rule, even the most successful Latino actors of the time did not often portray Latino characters. As Del Rio once commented, “I tried to interest my producers in stories about Mexico. I wanted to play a Mexican. But they preferred me to play a French woman or Polynesian” (qtd. in Ellenberger 70). The flexibility to play characters of white ethnicities effectively was blocked after the transition to talking film, however. Latino actors increasingly were cast only in Latino or other ethnic roles by the mid-1930s. Del Rio, for instance, began to be typecast as an inviting (though often elegant) Latina body on the screen, often as a singer or dancer who served as a siren for white male desire. Meanwhile, she no longer was offered the multi-dimensional protagonist roles that had contributed to her earlier stardom.

By the peak of the studio system era, these paradigms limited the career even of Del Rio, despite the fact that her Hollywood career survived the transition to sound by a decade. With respect to being cast in lead roles, Del Rio was soon overshadowed by white film actresses such as Ginger Rogers, Claudette Colbert, and Bette Davis. Such limitations became expected in Hollywood, as subsequent Latina actresses soon discovered and the next two case studies will illustrate.

Latina characters didn’t disappear in Hollywood film; in fact they proliferated in the Good Neighbor films of the 1940s. But as mentioned earlier, these generally were not narrativized roles that invited audience identification and thus would support stardom. They instead provided color to the settings in which white characters’ narratives were carried out. In addition, aside from a few

particularly successful actors and actresses, little publicity was given to the Latina performers who inhabited these roles.

Similar shifts were taking place in the sociopolitical landscape. During the years of early sound film, the famed Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles, once the heart of the Mexican American Los Angeles at the turn of the century, was restored as a popular tourist attraction, notable for its respectful quaintness. Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, well aware of their changing status in the country, were not necessarily impressed, however.

[R]estoration was completed at the very moment when thousands of Mexicans were being prodded to repatriate. The lesson was clear: Mexicans were to be assigned a place in the mythic past of Los Angeles—one that could be relegated to a quaint section of a city destined to delight tourists and antiquarians. Real Mexicans were out of sight and increasingly out of mind (Sánchez 226).

An argument can be made that the same thing was happening in Hollywood film at the time. Latino actors, both those who had achieved a level of fame as stars and those who were working to establish their careers, were increasingly relegated to circumscribed roles of quaintness at best, unable to battle against the tide of the American project of Hollywood film.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Rita Moreno in the Fifties and Sixties:**

#### **The Selling and Limitations of the Latina Star Body**

I played the role [of the Latin Spitfire] to the hilt, but at least it got me attention. It amused and charmed people. “Isn’t she something! What a firecracker!” If that’s all I could get then that’s what I settled for. There was never a possibility of being anything else in my head, in my perception. The people around didn’t help; the society didn’t help (Rita Moreno qtd. in Suntree 49).

While Dolores Del Rio was facing increasingly circumscribed roles in the post-talkies Hollywood star system of the 1930s, a young Puerto Rican girl on New York’s Upper West Side was just beginning her training as a performer who would eventually become the most critically lauded Latina film star of another era, the post-war period of the 1950s and 1960s. Rita Moreno, born Rosa Dolores Alverio in 1931, reached the pinnacle of stardom and critical acclaim possible for a Latina with a Latin surname and olive complexion (distinguishing her in this time period from the more whitewashed star Rita Hayworth) during her first decades in Hollywood.

In the film world, some would argue that Moreno’s talent was first officially recognized when she won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in 1962 for her role as Anita in *West Side Story* (1961), making her one of only a handful of Latinos and one of only two Latinas ever to have won an

Oscar.<sup>1</sup> Since that time she has topped this feat with the unmatched distinction of being one of only four performers—of any ethnicity—ever to have won all four of the major entertainment awards, in theater (the Tony), film (the Academy Award), television (the Emmy), *and* sound recording (the Grammy) during her lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Rita Moreno also has been unique in her outspoken critique of the Hollywood entertainment industries over the decades with regard to the obstacles she has faced as a Latina actor, both in the many interviews she has given and in work supporting advocacy efforts to improve opportunities for actors and other professionals.

Through her combination of talent, drive, and professionalism, Moreno arguably achieved “all a Latina could get” from a film career and related star promotion in Hollywood in the post-studio era, accomplishing more than any other Latina of the period. This was despite the obstacles posed by the traditional racial politics of casting and star promotion of the era, which generally translated to simply not considering Latinas for lead roles in Hollywood film. “When you were Latina and at that time... It was perceived that there was no possibility of someone like myself becoming a person of note,” Moreno said in a 1995 interview with filmmaker Susan Racho for the upcoming documentary *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Latinos/as who have won the Academy Award include Jose Ferrer, who won the Best Actor award for *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1949); Anthony Quinn, who won two Academy Awards as Best Supporting Actor in his lifetime, for his roles in *Viva Zapata!* (1952) and *Lust for Life* (1956); Mercedes Ruehl—the other Latina who has been recognized with an Academy Award, who won the award for Best Supporting Actress for *The Fisher King* (1991); and Benicio Del Toro, who was named Best Supporting Actor for *Traffic* (2000). Latinos/as who have been nominated include Katy Jurado, who was nominated for Best Supporting Actress for *High Noon* in 1952, and Anthony Quinn, who was nominated for Best Actor for *Wild Is the Wind* (1957) and *Zorba the Greek* (1964).

<sup>2</sup> Moreno’s two Emmy wins were for performances on episodes of *The Muppet Show* in 1977 and *The Rockford Files* in 1978. In addition, she won a Grammy Award for her work on an album of *Electric Company* songs in 1972. Finally, her Tony win was for her performance in the role of Googie Gomez in the Broadway play *The Ritz* in 1975.

*Bronze Screen*. "... [I]t's not as though they resisted the possibility, the possibility didn't exist in the minds of most people."

Moreover, popular culture was undergoing some major shifts during this period, which particularly influenced female star representation. It was a time period when Americans were looking to escape the conformity of the times through novelty and excitement in popular culture. As Bogle attests, female stars in turn often embodied the "nation's avid interest in sexy rebelliousness" (*Brown* 120). Given the climate of the times and the historical paradigm of Latina representation that preceded them, Moreno was not able to escape the inscription of tropicalist tropes in her star promotion and often had to take roles she considered denigrating just to stay working in the film industry.

While broad generalizations are difficult to make, Latina leads and supporting characters were never to have the consistently positive valence that they generally had in Dolores Del Rio's heyday. As was discussed in Chapter 2, following the advent of the sound film, Latinas were cast in increasingly similar and limited roles. Moreno has reported in interviews that stereotypical notions of Latinas often blocked her from being cast in roles that would challenge her acting abilities and which were not dependent on colonialist fantasies. While the actress found it easy to be cast as barefoot Indian maidens, Polynesian servant girls, or tavern wenches, as she played in *The Yellow Tomahawk* (1954), *Pagan Love Song* (1951), *The Vagabond King* (1956), and countless other films, she found she was not considered for romantic lead roles, reserved strictly for white actresses in this period. African American actresses similarly found their options to be extremely limited. Light-skinned actresses Dorothy Dandridge and Eartha Kitt experienced limited stardom in the 1950s, typically in "sex kitten" roles, and never in roles designated for white characters.

Star publicity surrounding Hollywood Latinas during the studio and post-studio eras also appears to have been ambivalent at best. Studies of the star

discourse surrounding Latina stars by such scholars as Rodríguez-Estrada, López (“Are There Latins”), Shari Roberts, and Hershfield have highlighted the complex ways in which Latinas were “kept in their place” in Hollywood films and the star system at this time, even while they were lauded as talented, funny, and/or beautiful.

It was in this ambivalent and not particularly welcoming climate that Rita Moreno worked in her first decades in Hollywood, managing throughout to continue working and to achieve a level of recognition and status within the star system, accomplishments in themselves in light of these limitations. The career and publicity—and oftentimes, lack of publicity—that Moreno experienced in her early film career, as well as her struggles to be seen as more than an inviting Latina body, reflect and reveal many aspects of the social climate toward Latinas in Hollywood and in the country at large in the post-World War II era.

Despite the obstacles, Rita Moreno has maintained an active career notable in both its length and breadth; it continues today in the areas of film, television (most recently on the critically lauded HBO drama series, *Oz* [1997+]), and theater, providing far more material for study than can be adequately addressed here. For the purposes of this project, I will focus almost exclusively on the construction of Rita Moreno-as-star during her film career from 1950 through 1970. This end point, when Moreno began a five-year stint on the children’s television program *The Electric Company* (1970-1977), was chosen as a natural transition in Moreno’s film career.

I therefore approach this case study with the following questions as my guide: How was Moreno “sold” to the mainstream American public as a rising star in the 1950s, and how was this evolving image related to attitudes toward Latinas in Hollywood and in the American imaginary? Can similar tropes or tendencies be discerned in this publicity to those utilized in the construction of Dolores Del Río’s star image in the late 1920s and 1930s? And finally, what

impact did Moreno's 1961 Oscar win, one of Hollywood's highest honors, as well as changing tides of public sentiment toward Latinos and other non-white groups in the 1960s, have on her subsequent star image and status in Hollywood?

These questions in mind, I explore in this chapter how Rita Moreno managed to achieve a level of stardom in the 1950s and 1960s. In particular I examine to the extent possible the behind-the-scenes choices, work, and publicity that resulted in Moreno's star image at two pivotal junctures in her career: first, her introduction to the American public in the early to mid-1950s, and second, after Moreno's Oscar win in 1961 for portraying the role of Anita, a gutsy Puerto Rican teenager, in *West Side Story*.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, I will look at one film project of Rita Moreno's post-1970 career that illustrates subsequent developments in the American imaginary with respect to Latina representation, Moreno's role as Puerto Rican singer Googie Gomez in the *The Ritz* (1976), a reprise of the role she portrayed in the successful Broadway play of the same name. This role and the positive acclaim Moreno received for her performance lend important insights regarding shifting paradigms of Latina representation that began to be experienced in the 1970s, as well as the importance and power of Latina creative agency in these constructions.

To provide a broader context for these questions, I next examine the sociocultural backdrop of national and industrial developments that had an impact on Latino casting and stardom in the post-studio era. In the subsequent sections I explore how the breakdown of the studio system, changing movie audiences, and the rise of the agent influenced the color line in Hollywood casting and promotion. Finally, my case study of the shaping of Rita Moreno's star image during these decades will serve to illustrate this discussion.

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3 Unfortunately, actresses in Hollywood generally have a limited window of opportunity with respect to stardom, with a decline in opportunity often around the age of 30, a much earlier age than is the case for male actors (Monaco 120). Thus Moreno arguably had the largest window of

## POST-WAR HOLLYWOOD: NO ROOM FOR LATINO STARS?

Times were difficult for aspiring actors in Hollywood after the Second World War, with Latino actors and other actors of color facing particular challenges. The studios continued to play it safe in uncertain business times by following age-old patterns of casting and star promotion, such that establishing even a minor career in Hollywood film was a major accomplishment for an unknown and particularly a Latina actress such as Rita Moreno.

For one, by the late 1940s, the major studios and top stars “maintained an uneasy alliance,” prompting less turnover in casting than earlier in the decade, as Schatz asserts (*Boom* 354). This was in large measure because studios were on the defensive in a last-ditch effort to maintain control over the industry in the face of changes wrought by the 1948 *Paramount* decision.<sup>4</sup> By the mid 1950s, filmgoing also had dropped dramatically, from 90 million weekly admissions, the all-time high, in 1946, to only 45 million. Four years later it had dropped again to 40 million.<sup>5</sup>

This drop in movie theater attendance was due to a variety of social developments in the U.S. The suburbs were expanding rapidly, with many middle-class white Americans in particular moving out of cities. Over 3,000 theaters closed, many in city centers. Eventually almost the same number of drive-in theaters opened in suburban and rural locations (Hillier 13). Families and adult women also stopped going to movie theaters with the frequency they had in previous decades, especially as many families enjoyed increased affluence

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opportunity with respect to Hollywood stardom, in the form of being cast in romantic lead roles, throughout the 1950s.

<sup>4</sup> As film historians have documented, the *Paramount* decision forced the major studios to sell off their theater chains in the subsequent years, leaving them in a newly vulnerable position.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson and Bordwell, 374; Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 512.

and other leisure pursuits, particularly television and radio, were competing for their time and money. As drive-in theaters began to be built, movie audiences consisted more predominantly of young people and especially teen-aged boys and young adult men. This shift was soon reflected in genre trends—fewer romances and melodramas were produced, while action-adventure and other youth-oriented action and sensation-focused films were on the rise.<sup>6</sup>

Caution on the part of the studios in turn was prompted by the perception that there were higher stakes involved in film projects than in previous years. Fewer films in fact were being released, with each film costing more to make than in previous decades. This new equation, combined with a loss of confidence and security after the *Paramount* decision, resulted in studios being more tentative about greenlighting films. As Mast and Kawin argue, “the most dependable films [of the era] were either very expensive or very cheap” (287). As a result of these changes, fewer studios were signing actors and filmmakers to long-term contracts, with MGM a notable exception with respect to its delay in this process.<sup>7</sup> Thus new and/or unproven actors had a more difficult time breaking into the industry in this climate.

With the many changes taking place in the social landscape, film producers found it increasingly difficult to predict what would be popular with audiences. “[T]here was terrific uncertainty about what might be said, how it might be said, and to whom it might be said—an uncertainty that increased with every passing year” (Mast and Kawin 314). With GIs returning from the war and social confidence on the rise, it was a time of increased marriages and a “baby boom” of births. Another characteristic of the times was a surge in the numbers of

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<sup>6</sup> Conversely, in the star system of the 1950s-60s, male stars of the action hero variety increasingly dominated, as Paul Monaco points out.

<sup>7</sup> Rita Moreno in fact signed a seven-year contract with MGM in late 1949, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

teens and young adults and the formation of a distinct youth culture within the larger popular culture, in effect, the birth of the Teenager.

It was an era of markedly contradictory situations for Americans of different ethnicities as well. As a result of the war, the 1950s were a time of unprecedented prosperity for U.S. corporations and for many American citizens, for whom “average take home pay” doubled in real terms (Wilinsky 81).<sup>8</sup> But Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans generally did not experience the rise in prosperity and confidence of their white American counterparts. Many Latino GIs found when they returned home that they faced the same problems of discrimination and blocked opportunities that existed before they had left to fight for the U.S.<sup>9</sup> Although the GI Bill of Rights helped some Latino World War II veterans go to college and buy homes, problems of anti-Latino discrimination with respect to education, employment, and housing continued to be entrenched (Acuña *Occupied*, Gonzalez).

Like Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans also experienced the fallout of broken promises of the post-war era. Puerto Ricans had begun migrating to the mainland in the mid-1920s, the majority settling in New York City, as María E. Pérez y González documents. A part of this wave of migration, for example, Rita Moreno’s mother moved to Manhattan in 1936 to pursue work opportunities not available on the island of Puerto Rico and later sent for her daughter to join her. However, as Moreno and her mother and many other Puerto Ricans discovered, conditions remained harsh for Nuyoricans. Unemployment and low-paying employment opportunities, housing discrimination, and poor education opportunities resulted in widespread poverty for Puerto Ricans both in the New

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<sup>8</sup> According to historians David Horowitz, Peter Carroll and David Lee, “In 1956, the annual average income was 50 percent higher [in constant dollars] than in 1929” (42).

<sup>9</sup> As many as 500,000 Mexican Americans served in World War II. See Raul Morín, *Among the Valiant*; or Rudolfo Acuña, *Occupied America*.



York City area and on the island of Puerto Rico, who found themselves in a constant one-down position similar to that faced by Mexican Americans.<sup>10</sup>

In the city of Los Angeles, home of the film industry, lack of lucrative job and education opportunities damaged the Latino community, which struggled with poverty, unemployment and underemployment in this period. In the city, freeway construction from 1940 to 1960 carved up predominantly Mexican American neighborhoods, fragmenting the community and destroying some of its most important districts, as well as leaving it a far weaker political entity in the city (*Acuña Community*). The new freeways also effectively sheltered most movie industry executives from their Latino neighbors.

The studios had little fear with respect to challenge from Latino advocacy groups at this time, however. Such groups tended to focus in this era on working within the system to secure equal legal rights for Latino citizens, to the exclusion of other issues. *Acuña (Occupied)* points out that LULAC, the League of United Latin American Citizens, made one of its primary goals having the classification of Latinos changed from “non-white” to “white” on the U.S. Census and other governmental classifications in this time period, in the hopes that this would result in Latinos being treated with equal respect and opportunity. Media advocacy was only occasionally taken up in these decades. And as the previous discussion of the Production Code indicates, the MPAA arbiters were not particularly worried about offending Latino American moviegoers.

The casting of Latino actors and actresses was confounded as well by political ambivalence in Hollywood in the 1950s, a decade in which both progressive and conservative movements were felt. In this era of rising social consciousness and political activism on the part of some Americans, politically

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<sup>10</sup> According to Horowitz, Carroll, and Lee, 80 percent of New York City’s Puerto Rican families still earned less than the government’s estimated minimum levels for ‘modest but adequate’ living standards” in the 1950s (60).

conservative attitudes continued to structure many institutions, including the film industry, as scholars such as Lipsitz, and Shohat and Stam have documented. These ideological contradictions were felt in a continuing “white centrality” in much of Hollywood film and limited casting opportunities for Latino and other non-white actors and actresses in just a few genres, as I discuss further below (Coyne 4).

The progressivism that characterized many films of the post-war era, as described by Schatz (*Boom* 353), did offer some, albeit limited opportunity to Latino acting hopefuls. According to Schatz, this temporary progressive bent was the result of raised awareness brought on by the war and the consciousness-raising efforts of civil rights groups, as well as the increasing influence of European and other foreign films. There were attempts by the majors and independent production companies to produce films with more dedication to realism and to exposing social problems than ever before, particularly in the years immediately following WWII.

The social-problem genre and increased complexity and realism in many other genres were in part end results of this new social consciousness. Both trends created openings for actors who traditionally had been overlooked. Several films featured African American actors prominently, including *Carmen Jones* (1954) and *Porgy and Bess* (1959), creating an opening for African American film stardom in the U.S. The social-problem film cycle similarly offered new opportunities to Latino and Latina actors, as Berg (“Bordertown”) and Noriega (“Citizen”) document, with Rita Moreno’s turn as a clean-cut Mexican American teenager in *The Ring* (1952), a film that focused on issues of discrimination against Mexican Americans at the time, one such example.

These developments coexisted with more conservative trends, however; thus the opening that was created for Latino and other actors was limited and fleeting. The Cold War was firmly entrenched in the U.S. in the first years of the

1950s, prompting attacks on interpreted threats to the “American way.” The fallout included a quick shift on the part of studios from the production of films that contained overt political critique of American politics or culture (Sayre *Running Time*). As Sklar states, “the country’s postwar political climate conspired with economic need to push Hollywood back to its familiar forms” (283).

These trends thus entailed a return to conservative and nativist ideologies that predominated during the 1930s (Shindler 52-72). The “all-American” stance that had solidified in Hollywood film in the 1930s and 1940s, as discussed in Chapter 2, now quite solidly translated to equating American with white. Latino actors continued to have a hard time being cast in substantial roles, given the solid primacy of whiteness in the Hollywood star system of this era. Latinos who did find any opportunity were generally relegated to villain, comic sidekick, or temporary romantic interest roles within this “American” diegesis.

Moreover, as the protections of the studio system were dismantled, the growing ranks of independent producers, in need of risk-free film projects, “were tied to formulas to an even greater extent than ever before” (Sklar 282). This firmly entrenched “white centrality” is evident in the popular film genres of the era (Coyne 4), which included Westerns, musicals, comedies, war dramas, and costume dramas. For instance, Westerns of the era generally celebrated “national aggrandizement and implicit acceptance of racism,” constructing an “American identity ...[that] was white and male” (Coyne 3-4). Latina and “half-breed” characters (such as often played by Rita Moreno) often represented an enigmatic conflict that needed to be overcome in these Western narratives, “the trouble in the text,” as Hershfield argues (92).

This snapshot into the period highlights not just the centrality of whiteness in Hollywood at the time, but also how much American tastes had changed since the late silent era in which romantic melodramas about foreign lands and heroes

had reigned supreme and Dolores Del Rio had been a top star. With respect to Latinos, their “lesser whiteness” had become further entrenched in Hollywood diegeses and the star system.

### **LATINOS IN THE “DEBBIE REYNOLD'S WORLD”**

The scarce few Latinos who were able to maintain careers under these conditions alongside Rita Moreno, the subject of this chapter, included Ricardo Montalban, Katy Jurado, Cesar Romero, and Anthony Quinn. These actors generally had to compete for limited roles specified as Latino or otherwise as ethnic, however, as I discuss further in this section. And while the rise in independent film production that followed the splintering of the studio system offered some new opportunities, they often entailed the imbrication of age-old Latin stereotypes as well.

The continuing color line that Latinos faced in Hollywood with respect to casting opportunities had a profound impact on possibilities for stardom, considering that the roles that Latinos were offered were seldom well developed or positive enough to showcase star appeal. Latino and Latina roles had taken on a more negative cast as the former romanticization of upper-class Mexicans no longer held sway in the U.S., and at any rate these roles were few and far between. Latinas in particular found opportunities only in roles that posed them as temporary romantic or sexual objects, often as fiery spitfire types. In illustration, in a 1972 interview with *TV Guide*, Moreno reported that in most roles she was required to

merely flare my nostrils, gnash my teeth and look spirited. That doesn't take much talent. I was limited to certain roles in certain films by reason of being a Latin. It was a Debbie Reynolds world and there was no way I could flex my acting muscles in it” (December 2, 1972, 20).

Moreover, as mentioned previously, Latino and Latina roles that were substantial and positive enough to be star-making were cast almost universally with Anglo actors. The ranks of actors who played Latinos in brownface in this period included Paul Muni, Marlon Brando, Natalie Wood, Marlene Dietrich, and Charlton Heston. For example, the role of Emiliano Zapata in *Viva Zapata!* (1951) was played by Marlon Brando, while that of Maria in *West Side Story* (1961) was played by Natalie Wood.

Evolving beauty norms also figured into the increasingly limited opportunities that Latina actors faced in these decades. As was discussed in the previous chapter, while the star discourse that surrounded Latina stars in the late studio era often highlighted their dark beauty, there also were simultaneous, competing discourses that trumpeted the powerful primacy of the more “all-American” national ideal. Beauty standards in the post-WWII period continued to posit Latinas as less American and thus necessarily less beautiful than their white female counterparts, maintaining the construction of a hegemonic lesser whiteness that Latinas would not be able to shake.

For instance, the Miss America beauty pageant, which was established in 1920, became a site for the display and celebration of U.S. beauty standards after World War II, when it became more “patriotic and respectable” for middle-class young women to take part in the pageant (Cohen, Wilke, and Stoeltje 4). Miss America came to embody an American (read: uncontestedly white) definition of beauty that included such class-inflected qualities as citizenship and poise. Latinas, or at least identifiably “ethnic” Latinas with Spanish surnames, did not compete in the pageant, however. The ambiguous racial status of Latinas arguably precluded them from participating, although whether they were turned away or merely not included without thought is not known.

Another illustration of developing American beauty standards was the Barbie doll™, which began to be marketed to American girls in 1955. Forever tall,

blond, and 36-24-36, Barbie arguably embodied the ideal white American beauty, as feminist authors such as Ophira Edut, Rebecca Walker, and Wendy Chapkis elucidate. Latinas could not compete in this hegemonic realm of American beauty standards.

Nowhere was the assertion of the social order through standards of American beauty more evident perhaps than in the Hollywood diegesis. Social reactions to the global events of the Second World War had only exacerbated this trend. As Roberts states:

During World War II, Axis powers—the Japanese, the Germans as represented by Hitler, and the Italians as represented by Mussolini—were portrayed in the popular press by ethnic stereotypings that stressed dark hair and dark skin. Blond, therefore, came to be perceived as the most unquestionably “American” hair color, and it is not a surprise that [early 1940s film star Carmen] Miranda’s studio supported a golden blond policy: all of Fox’s female wartime stars—Betty Grable, Alice Faye, and Vivian Blaine—were uniformly blond (4).

In Hollywood’s re-imagining of the social order, Latina beauty was positioned so as not to challenge this primacy of the blond movie goddess. Given that Latino-cast films were not produced in similar numbers as such black-cast films as *Carmen Jones*, which provided African American actress Dorothy Dandridge with her star-making turn, Latinas had virtually no shot at starring roles. At best, Latina actors instead were cast in marginalized, second lead roles, in the case of Rita Moreno as self-sacrificing Indian maidens or the cantina girl one could always kiss but never marry.

The growth of independent film production in the 1950s did provide opportunity to a few Latinas in Hollywood, including Rita Moreno and Katy Jurado, though again only in peripheral roles. Independent film production was on the rise throughout the decade, as the majors began to produce fewer and more expensive films and exhibitors looked for less expensive product to fill their

theaters, as Monaco documents (24).<sup>11</sup> This increase, alongside the new medium of television's need for material to broadcast, provided new opportunities for tenacious actors and actresses of all ethnicities. But opportunities for Latino actresses generally were still limited to stereotypical roles.

In this regard, while freedom from studio contracts and working in independent productions allowed top actors to avoid being pigeonholed as a particular "type" and have more of a say in the publicity that made up their star image, actors with less status generally found no improvement in their lot. Latino actors often had to take roles they might consider denigrating or not work at all, and generally had little say regarding the tenor of whatever star promotion they might receive. Also of note, independent production companies, without the ability or need to support a long-term star contract system, relied more on exploitative publicity techniques in their promotion of films and actors, rather than on promotion geared toward the creation of sustained and self-perpetuating star images such as the majors generally attempted in previous decades. Such publicity techniques, by necessity, often capitalized on stereotyping of all sorts above more nuanced portrayals and promotion.

#### **POST-STUDIO SHIFTS IN THE 1960S: MORE OF THE SAME**

The 1960s brought about not only the end of the last remnants of the studio system, but also a number of other industrial shifts that were to have an impact on the racial politics of casting, including the rise in financial stakes in the production and distribution of feature films, growth in the power of talent agents, and the increasing youth, male-dominance, and, in a more limited fashion, social consciousness of movie audiences. As I discuss below, many top Hollywood stars, particularly male stars, experienced a newfound freedom and leverage in

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<sup>11</sup> According to Monaco, "by 1958, half of the features produced in the United States were 'independent.' Two years later, two-thirds of the feature films being produced ... were attributed to 165 different production entities" (24).

their careers as a result of these shifts. But Latino and Latina actors were not among this elite group.

In this decade the film industry continued to experience losses at the box office. These financial setbacks prompted several corporate takeovers late in the decade, even while the studios continued to play a powerful role in the industry as financiers and distributors of films.<sup>12</sup> As the industry scrambled to back sure-fire productions, it “invested greater hopes in the effectiveness of ‘star power’” (Monaco 120).<sup>13</sup> Thus some actors, again only the top stars, were able to pick projects with newfound flexibility and leverage. But while Latino actors were still generally not considered lucrative box office-earners, they did not experience these benefits.

The rise of the agent also provided another obstacle for Latino actors attempting to establish careers. Talent agents gained greater power in this period, picking up where the studios had left off. “By the sixties, according to some estimates, nearly 70 percent of all films were brought to the studios as pre-packaged deals,” according to David A. Cook (*Lost* 20). As agents came to package entire projects, including the material, stars, and director, they were increasingly important in making or breaking actors’ careers.

Personal contacts in the industry therefore became increasingly important for actors to establish and maintain a successful career, as Monaco has asserted, an aspect of the business in which Latinos attempting to break into the industry were often at a decided disadvantage. With the demise of the studio system’s *de facto* training and star grooming system, actors also had to come to Hollywood with this training in hand or to be lucky enough to secure an agent or personal

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<sup>12</sup> The industry also slowly regained its footing. “From a low of just over 140 features produced in 1963, the number climbed back to 230 by the end of the 1960s. By the mid 1970s the number exceeded 300, equaling once again the volume of production in the 1950s” (Monaco 39).

<sup>13</sup> This period marked the end of actors’ long-term contracts with studios, however. The last known such contract was that of Rock Hudson with Universal, which expired in 1965 (Monaco 19).



manager with deep enough pockets to fund this process. Actors and actresses without the financial ability to fund this training presumably were at a disadvantage in this post-studio environment.

Film audiences of the 1960s also indirectly influenced the casting of Hollywood films and the related star system. The youth of the new movie audience in particular had a profound impact. “By the end of the decade, the audience for theatrical movies in the United States ... consisted overwhelmingly of people under thirty” (Monaco 197). Audience tastes were rapidly evolving as well. In this time of “culture wars,” social unrest was on the rise, as was active involvement in civil rights, anti-war, and women’s movements. Many of the most popular films of the decade reflected the preoccupations of the new young adult audience: social consciousness, cynicism, and desire for sensation. Shifting audience tastes were factors in the lessening of opportunity for actresses in this time period. As male-oriented action films became increasingly popular, actresses had to compete for fewer leading roles for women (Monaco 120).

Popular genres also were reformulated as more mature subject matter and graphic sexual and violent content became the norm, as scholars such as Peter Biskin and Cook (*Lost*) attest, a development prompted by the desire to compete with television for young audiences and the scrapping of the Production Code in 1968. With respect to Latino representation, this emphasis on violent and sensational subject matter arguably played a part in the rise of the urban gang film in the 1970s, one of the few genres of the decade that was often cast with Latino actors. More generally, former stereotypical Latino and Latina roles at times became more overtly violent or sexualized in comparison to previous decades, as Cortés has documented.

The increased social activism of young Americans affected the industry in other ways as well. A number of demonstrations on the part of civil rights groups, women’s groups, and other activist groups were aimed at the media

industries, particularly toward the end of the decade. Such protests often focused on negative representations in the news and entertainment media and the lack of diverse employment behind the scenes. Chicano and Puerto Rican groups, for one, began to focus attention on and engage in public demonstrations in the late 1960s regarding how Latinos were represented in the mass media, with actions that ranged from protests against Frito-Lay's Frito Bandito advertising campaign to calls for increased and more positive representations of Latinos in advertising, film, and television (Noriega *Shot*). As Bogle attests with respect to African American representation, non-white audiences began to demand greater authenticity and political correctness from stars as well (*Brown*).

As Noriega details in *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*, around 1968 members of the movement began staging visible, wide-scale demonstrations to protest negative Latino imagery in film, television, advertising, and radio, as well as posing demands for increased access and employment of Hispanics within the media industries themselves (16). Established Latino advocacy groups such as LULAC and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) engaged in such protests, joining newer organizations such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). A number of groups also were organized in this time period with a primary focus on Latino media representation and access issues. Among these groups were CARISSMA, the Council to Advance and Restore the Image of the Spanish-Speaking and Mexican Americans, and JUSTICIA, Justice for Chicanos in the Motion Picture Industry. CARISSMA and Justicia in particular made efforts to advocate for Latino actors and actresses in Hollywood in their reform efforts.

As a result of the work of these groups and citizen-oriented media access legislation during this era, a number of training programs were established in media outlets, particularly at public television stations, and film school admission

policies were revised, which gave a handful of Latinos an opportunity to begin working and training in film and television. This first generation of Latino American filmmakers and entertainment industry professionals was to have a tremendous impact in creating opportunities that would enable future Latino stardom. These fruit of these labors would be experienced in the next decades, as will be discussed further in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

### **RITA MORENO, LATINA DANCER/HOLLYWOOD STARLET**

It was within this period of limited opportunities that Rita Moreno got her start in Hollywood and began what was to become more than a half-century-long career in film. Her entrance echoed that of her predecessor, Dolores Del Rio, in a number of respects, while also offering a case study of marked differences between these two industrial and social eras.

Rita Moreno, the daughter of Maria Rosa Marcáno and Paco Alverio, spent the first five years of her childhood in Humacao, Puerto Rico, a town of extremely limited economic opportunity. Her parents divorced when she was four, and Moreno's mother moved to New York to find work. She later sent for her young daughter, who moved in with her in a tough section of Spanish Harlem, at 180th and Amsterdam (Acker 114). From a very early age Moreno, then called Rosita and who later took her stepfather Edward Moreno's last name, showed great talent as a performer, and her family scraped together the money to send her to dance classes. She ended up taking Spanish dance classes with Paco Cansino of the famous Dancing Cansinos dance team, the uncle of Moreno's eventual contemporary, Rita Hayworth.

At the age of five, Moreno had her professional "debut," dancing with Paco Cansino at a nightclub in Greenwich Village. Moreno said in a 1995 interview that she later also studied tap dance and ballet when she realized that proficiency as a Spanish dancer would not take her too far (*Bronze Screen*

interview). She soon began to perform in children's theater, as well as at parties and other events. Interviewers over the years have been fond of repeating the fact that she at times performed as Carmen Miranda in her dance numbers, wearing a Miranda-style turban adorned with fruit on her head.

Moreno has shared in interviews that she initially dreamed of finding success as a dancer; it was meant to be her ticket to success, as it had been for other lucky *Puertorriqueñas*. "It was accepted at the time that as Puerto Rican boys could pull themselves out of poverty by excelling in boxing or baseball; girls could achieve success by becoming exceptional dancers," Moreno has been quoted as saying (Suntree 33). While the unfortunate racist assumption that Puerto Ricans have natural ability only in sports or dance can be discerned within this expectation, as Angela McRobbie has pointed out regarding African Americans in entertainment (44), the reality was that for Puerto Rican young people without financial means, they had to come to view their bodies in this manner as their only commodity on which to capitalize to get ahead (McRobbie 57).

Moreno wasn't the first Latina to catch Hollywood's eye through her dancing proficiency; this also was the case for Dolores Del Rio in the 1920s, and would later be the case for Jennifer Lopez. Notably, while both Del Rio and Moreno were known as fine dancers, Del Rio could engage in dance, as in acting, "on a lark," while for Moreno dance by necessity was an avocation that could put food on the table for her family.

Moreover, in Moreno's early years in Hollywood, it would have been quite difficult as a Latina to be signed to a studio contract without dancing or singing ability. As was discussed in the previous chapter, after the transition to sound film, Latinas generally were not offered entrance into the Hollywood star system when not in the role of the interloper-entertainer. The pairing of *Latinidad* with dance and music became further entrenched with the rise of Latin-themed

musicals in the 1930s and '40s. Although the cycle was on the wane by the 1950s, in this period Latina acting hopefuls still had few entrées into Hollywood aside from dance.

Thus in a parallel to Del Rio's experience, Moreno's performance as a young dancer garnered her first notice by a film studio. At 13, she was spotted at a dance school recital by a talent scout who worked for MGM. He continued to check in every year or so after that 1944 meeting, as he felt she could have a chance at a film career but thought Moreno initially was too young. Meanwhile, Moreno began working in various entertainment mediums—in radio, theater, experimental television, and dubbing Hollywood films into Spanish. Moreno also got her first Broadway role at the age of 13, the part of an Italian girl in an Eli Wallach war drama, *Skydrift*.

Around that time, Moreno switched from a regular public school to a special school for child performers, the Professional Children's School. At this school, Moreno was able to attend school for just half a day and devote the other half to her budding career as a performer. Encountering children who were professional actors was intimidating to the young Puerto Rican girl from Washington Heights who still saw herself very much as a nightclub dancing act, however, highlighting the subtle class and ethnic barriers that can make it difficult for young people from less advantaged backgrounds to acquire needed training to enter the acting arena in the U.S. "To [Moreno], the other students, who were mostly actors, seemed very sophisticated and confident. She felt left out and lonely" (Suntree 36). Moreno later switched to another school for young performers, the Barton School, where she felt more at ease.

Working steadily, she quit school at 16 in order to pursue a career as a performer full time. Moreno has said in interviews that her Hollywood role models at the time were Lana Turner and later, Elizabeth Taylor, as Latina stars in well-rounded, compelling dramatic film roles were virtually non-existent during

her formative years (*Bronze Screen* interview). With the assistance of her agent at the time, George Libby, she was able to secure singing and dancing engagements in nightclubs in Spanish Harlem and Greenwich Village. Even at this early stage, when Moreno was working in nightclubs despite the fact that she was too young to frequent them, she came to realize in her nightclub act that playing to audience stereotypes of Latinas could help her career. As she got used to the nightclub routine, Moreno played up a Latin spitfire image because it got her work and attention. An illustration of the strength of these tropes in the American imagination can be found in the case of one of her nightclub engagements. One of the New Jersey clubs Rosita played was decorated like a jungle. When the owners, reputedly mobsters, wanted to bill her as “Rosita the Cheetah,” she did not object (Suntree 40).

Having a keen sense of how and when to play to Latin stereotypes, Moreno also didn’t need a publicist to tell her that she needed to present herself as the right kind of ethnic in order to impress when she had a chance to break into film acting. The 5’2”, slight Latina tried to make herself look as much like Elizabeth Taylor as possible when she had a chance to meet Louis B. Mayer, then head of MGM. It worked. At their meeting he reportedly commented that she did indeed look like a Latin Liz Taylor. They spent a few hours talking, and Moreno was subsequently offered a seven-year contract. She was 18 years old at the time, and as a singer and dancer, considered a contract with MGM, the studio most associated with the Hollywood musical, a dream come true.

On December 26, 1949, Moreno, then going by Rosita Moreno, signed the paperwork to become a contract player. The MGM management suggested at the time that she change her stage name to Tina Moreno; she compromised and became Rita Moreno (Considine 5). “[Mayer] thought the name too corny, even for a Spanish spitfire. She did what he said, imagining he would turn her into the next Lana Turner” (Acker 114). It was to be the first of many compromises she

would have to make in order to maintain a career in her first decades in Hollywood.

### **THE MGM YEARS: “THEY’RE GONNA DROP YOU LIKE A BAD HABIT”**

Moreno’s few years as a studio player for MGM illustrate how Hollywood studios had little use for Latina actors in the early 1950s, while Latin musicals were on the wane and the racial politics of casting dictated that Latinas not be cast in non-ethnic lead roles. Moreno benefited from the training opportunities offered by the studio, however, one of the vestiges of the studio system still in place at the time. Despite being cast only in small roles in MGM musicals and receiving next to no promotion, Moreno also received strongly positive critical reviews, which assisted her in establishing a career, as I discuss below.

According to Schatz, MGM, the largest of the majors, was in many ways still operating at this point in time as if the studio system were not disintegrating (*Boom*). A survey of the studios’ releases during the last years of the 1940s and the early 1950s reveals that it continued to produce expensive, often Technicolor features, and had revived the musical to the extent that they had come to comprise 25 percent of MGM’s total output. It also continued to maintain a large roster of stars for several years. In 1949 the studio still had over eighty stars under contract (Schatz *Boom* 335), including Gene Kelly, Stanley Donen, Lana Turner, Ricardo Montalban, June Allyson, Mario Lanza, and Esther Williams.

The studio was no exception in terms of traditional Hollywood politics. While Dore Schary, head of MGM film production at the time, was known for his left-wing leanings, he had promised when began his tenure that the studio would focus on making “good films about a good world.”<sup>14</sup> Examination of Moreno’s tenure at MGM highlights the tenuous place of Latino and Latina actors in this good world of the early 1950s.

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<sup>14</sup> *Motion Picture Herald* 17 July 1948, p. 8; *Variety* 11 August 1948, p. 5.

At the end of 1949, Moreno arrived in Los Angeles with her mother and half brother. She had already acted in one film soon to be released, *So Young So Bad* (1950), billed as Rosita Moreno. In this United Artists film Moreno portrayed a juvenile delinquent at a corrupt girls' reform school who is mistreated and eventually commits suicide. Even in this small role, Moreno received positive notice in reviews by critics, which included mentions in the *Hollywood Reporter* and *Hollywood Citizen News*. Moreno credits Paul Henreid, the top-billed star in the film (best known for his role as Victor Laszlo in *Casablanca*), with providing her first break in the film industry. Henreid did this, according to Moreno, through prompting her hiring when she was a complete unknown and for encouraging and helping her do a good job throughout the making of the film (Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Dept., "Biography Notes: Rita Moreno" 7).

In the film, Moreno plays Dolores, a young Latina teen picked up for vagrancy.<sup>15</sup> She explains later in the film that she had begun running away from home because she was ashamed when her mother, who couldn't speak English, had visited her school. In this manner discrimination against Latinos in the U.S. is treated with a modicum of seriousness in the film. Nevertheless, Dolores is characterized as damaged goods, with her ethnicity tied in with that damage in subtle ways. Ultimately the narrative implies that as a Latina, Dolores is naturally prone to mentally unbalanced thinking and actions, in a similar construction to another character with lesbian tendencies, while the other girls, who happen to be Anglo, developed their dysfunctional behaviors as a result of intense trauma and family hardship. She also is constructed as living completely outside her family and culture, aside from one incongruous scene in which her family visits her at the reform school.

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<sup>15</sup> It is not clarified in the storyline, but Dolores is presumably Mexican American, given her devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe and other references in the storyline.



Clichés about Dolores’ Latino culture abound in the characterization as well. The few moments in the film in which Dolores appears happy are when she stares moonily at her beloved Virgin of Guadalupe figurine and when she sings a song in Spanish, accompanying herself with a guitar. A United Artists publicity photograph of Moreno, perhaps not surprisingly, emphasizes this moment in which Moreno’s character engages in a seemingly out-of-character musical interlude. The photo of the then-unknown Rosita also emphasizes her youth and innocence, what might even be called a “girl-next-door” purity. Thus Moreno was positioned by United Artists in a manner that echoed the star construction of her predecessor, Dolores Del Rio, as an appropriate (unthreatening) ethnic.

Upon Moreno’s signing of the studio contract, MGM launched her first publicity as a contract player. Brief articles about Moreno’s new contract appeared in both *The Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Examiner* (both Dec. 26, 1949). Apparently both newspapers were alerted to Moreno’s day in court to get a judge’s approval of the contract, as the accompanying photographs were taken by the newspapers’ photographers. Moreno is already referred to by her new stage name in both articles. Aside from this similarity, the two newspapers take subtly distinctive slants that highlight the importance and power of word choice and images in introducing a potential Latina star to the American public.

The *Examiner* article, which was accompanied by a photo of Moreno, referred to Moreno as “vivacious” and an “18-year-old Puerto Rican actress” whose “dancing, singing, and acting talents led to her discovery by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer scouts.” In an era in which femininity was often paired with notions of sexual disinterest and a chaste demeanor, the term “vivacious” must be considered as perhaps having more of a sexual connotation than it would today. Effort appears to have been taken by the *Examiner* photographer to capture Moreno in an extremely active, emotive pose; she almost seems to be shouting in glee over her new contract.

The *Times* took a slightly different approach. The newspaper made no mention of Moreno's ethnicity. It also described Moreno as a "vivacious 18 year-old girl," however. This identical descriptor likely indicates that the word appeared prominently in a press release or biography generated by MGM and sent to the press. The commentary added that Moreno had "trained for the stage all her life" and proved herself both to talent scouts and through screen tests. In the accompanying photo, Moreno is shown in a more dignified, ladylike pose.

It is telling to compare this introductory publicity to that which launched the career of Dolores Del Rio in the mid-1920s, both in terms of the tenor and the breadth of the publicity. Credibility in Moreno's case was achieved through emphasizing how she passed the gauntlet of the official talent screens that had been put in place in the studio system's heyday, that her abilities were proven through the notice of talent scouts, the passing of screen tests, and previous training and experience in the worlds of theater, music, and dance—in the absence of a successful sponsor such as Edwin Carewe or the high-class background that Del Rio claimed.

Moreno's publicity also is noticeably scant in comparison to Del Rio's in terms of their respective arrivals in Los Angeles. Moreno took dance and acting classes at the studio five days a week and received the studio salary, benefiting from the remnants of the old-time studio practices still in place at MGM. Despite the existence of a large publicity department at MGM, however, Moreno was not launched as a potential star. Only one general MGM publicity still of Moreno could be located from this time period, which does not come close to amounting to a star-making promotional effort. This close-up of the young Rita in a black lacy dress emphasizes Moreno's dark beauty and creates the appearance of a sense of mystery around the actress.

The roles Moreno was offered in the studio's films were not substantial, moreover, which indicates that MGM considered the 18-year-old a good

candidate mainly for second-lead or ensemble roles. She appeared in two MGM films, first as a young Cajun woman in the Mario Lanza-Kathryn Grayson romantic musical, *The Toast of New Orleans* (1950), and later, in brownface, as a Tahitian girl in *Pagan Love Song* (1951), an Esther Williams bathing beauty musical. While Moreno apparently was considered an "ethnic type" who could portray off-white females of all types, Hollywood conventions dictated she would not, however, be cast in "white" romantic lead roles. As mentioned previously, the Hollywood paradigm of the era maintained a color line in the industry that categorized Latinas as non-white, offering only limited opportunity of the all-purpose ethnic variety.

In *Toast of New Orleans*, a Joe Pasternak-unit musical that combined opera numbers by Lanza and Grayson and Cajun-inspired musical dances, Moreno's dance background and high energy were put to good use. In the film she plays Tina, a fiery young Cajun woman—in essence, a Creole version of the half-breed harlot—in love with local fisherman Pepe (Lanza), who only has eyes for Suzette (Grayson), a white opera singer. Moreno and Lanza sing and dance in several Cajun-inflected numbers together. With these numbers, the precedent began that would haunt Moreno throughout her early film career: She is the woman in "his" arms while he looks longingly at the white woman with whom he will ultimately end up, the narrative equivalent of an ethnic fetish.

Moreno received little promotion from the studio in connection with the film, even in Spanish-language versions of the studio's press books. In press materials for the film, only one publicity still of Moreno could be located, the MGM-commissioned photograph included above. Despite the lack of promotion and screen time, Rita Moreno received positive mention in reviews for the film, however. *Variety* described her as "vivacious" in her role (August 8, 1950) (again, perhaps influenced by MGM press materials), while the *Los Angeles Times* predicted that "the girl may go places" in describing Moreno (Scheuer,

October 14, 1950). “Vivacious” begins to appear to be a Hollywood code word for “spitfire” in such publicity.

Moreno received less promotion and critical attention for *Pagan Love Song*, produced by Arthur Freed’s unit, again with no mention in the English-language exhibitors’ press book and scant mention in the Spanish-language version. American fantasies of the Polynesian islands generally structure the characterizations of the Tahitian people in the film, who are portrayed as working for free, having no sense of money, and only living for the moment and bodily pleasure. In the film Moreno and Charles Mauu, who play a Tahitian brother and sister, serve as cheerful, colorful foils for the American characters played by Howard Keel and Esther Williams. Moreno as Tearu is more cute than sexual, a fantasy, infantilized island girl who above all aims to please her employer, played by Keel.

Again, the role did little to further her career, as ultimately, MGM didn’t know how to use the young actress. Moreno reports that she repeatedly asked Billy Grady, the head of casting at MGM, when she was going to be cast in another part. Finally he told her, “Honey, who’re you kiddin’? They’re gonna to drop you like a bad habit” (qtd. in Suntree 45). He was right; Rita Moreno was soon dropped by the studio, after less than two years. Moreno said later that Joe Pasternak, whose musical unit was second only to Arthur Freed’s on the lot, “fought like a tiger” for her to stay at the studio, but that “unfortunately there was nothing in any of the pictures coming up for a little Latin type, so he had nothing to back him up” (qtd. in Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Dept. “Biography Notes” 7).

These developments reflected a number of shifts in the industry, in particular the demise of the Latin musical and a lack of interest in casting actors who were Latin in appearance in other Hollywood genres at the time. Ultimately, the politics of casting in this era limited Moreno’s opportunities. With respect to

the elements of crossover stardom discussed in Chapter 1, an olive complexion and curly dark hair prevented Latina actors from being considered for such star promotion in this time period. Looking back, Moreno has cited both her Latina appearance and her Latin surname as elements that became obstacles in her career:

I think my ethnic background has affected my career enormously. I have a feeling that had I not had the name Rita Moreno even, for starters... because of my particular looks... If I don't want my hair to be curly and I pull it out with a blower, I really have a very different look... I know that my career would have been a very different one, a more active one and less of a struggle. It's still a struggle (*Bronze Screen* interview).

#### **STILL WORKING, BUT ALL-TOO-OFTEN BAREFOOT**

Without a studio contract, Moreno and her agent wrangled to secure any kind of work for Moreno in the next few years so that she could stay employed. This included a number of Latin spitfire, Indian maiden, and other pan-ethnic film roles. Most of these roles were negligible and did little to further Moreno's career, while a few garnered positive reviews despite their short screen time. Moreover, much of the promotion for these films capitalized on historical tropes of Latinas as seductive, passionate bodies, which did little to further Moreno's dream of having a more elegant star image and being offered more challenging roles.

Moreno managed to land the part of non-Latina tattletale Zelda Zanders in MGM's *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). It was a minor role, however, and a survey of publicity materials for the film indicates that Moreno's image did not appear in promotional materials such as posters or lobby cards. It apparently did little for her career, as this role was followed by a string of "Señorita" roles for various studios, many small, independent companies. These included roles in 1952–53 in Republic's *The Fabulous Señorita* (1952), Warner Bros.' *Cattle Town* (1952), and MGM's *Latin Lovers* (1953). These films are not accessible for general viewing

today, and thus my research regarding this period of Moreno's career was restricted to extratextual materials.

As was typical of these roles, Moreno's part in Republic's *The Fabulous Señorita* did not offer a lot of screen time. As a member of the mostly Latino cast, she played the sister of the lead, played by Estelita Rodriguez, also known simply as Estelita. With respect to publicity, the film was generally sold on Estelita's name and popularity; she is described in Republic's promotional poster as "The Toast of Pan America."<sup>16</sup> Despite the small part, Moreno was again praised for her performance. *Variety* said she "impresses" (March 7, 1952), while the *Hollywood Reporter* gushed that Moreno was "excellent" in her role (March 22, 1952).

Acting in the Warner Bros. Western *Cattle Town* was not as positive an experience, according to Moreno. Looking back, she described her role as "just a spitfire after Dennis Morgan, in the end he gets leading lady [Amanda Blake]" (Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Dept. "Rita Moreno Notes" 2). In B-picture style, promotional materials such as newspaper ads prominently featured Moreno's character, the passionate Queli, presumably to highlight the sensational and titillating aspects of the film to potential viewers. In advertisements that appeared in such newspapers as the *Los Angeles Examiner*, the title and tag lines (one of which was "The Wildest War the West's Grazing Country Ever Saw!") take up much of the ad space, while the pictorial component of the ad is dominated by an artist's rendering of Moreno as Queli clinging passionately to Morgan as Mike McGann as he's in the midst of a Western-style shootout. The size of Morgan's name in the credits underscores that he was the sole star of the film, however (Dec. 17, 1952). In reviews, critics commented on Moreno's good looks in her "flashy" role (*Variety* Nov. 26, 1952) but had little else to say. *Latin*

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<sup>16</sup> Cuban-born Estelita Rodriguez had a Hollywood film career from 1946 to 1953. She generally played Latina characters in musicals.

*Lovers*, as well, provided only a negligible role and no publicity to 12<sup>th</sup>-billed Moreno.

The most notable of Rita Moreno's roles in these years was her part as the romantic lead opposite Lalo Rios in *The Ring* (1952). This social problem film produced independently by the King Bros. and distributed by United Artists was unique in its realistic approach to the issue of discrimination against Mexican Americans in the U.S. and in Los Angeles in particular. *The Ring* offered Moreno her first lead role as Lucy, the straight-laced girlfriend of Tommy, a young Mexican American man who becomes a boxer. Her character is pivotal to the storyline, in which Tommy hopes that through putting up with the dangers of being a prize fighter he might make enough money to earn respect for himself and his family and friends. When ultimately he finds himself exploited and being put in physical danger, Lucy's unswerving integrity and steadfast love helps him to have the perserverence to pull through.

Moreno herself has noted that the film was quite unique, particularly in the time that it was released, with regard to how positive the Mexican American characters are in the film. "All the family in it are good people," she has said. "He is not a gangster, he is not a bad boy, she is anything but a bad girl, she is a good girl. She has very traditional Mexican values" (*Bronze Screen* interview). Despite the sensitive portrayal of these subjects in the film, the promotional materials by distributor United Artists have a decidedly ambiguous tone, however. In the press book for the film, exhibitors were offered a choice of promotional posters that, through differing wording and art, ran the gamut in tone from markedly focused on the issues of discrimination addressed in the film, to instead hyping the supposed sexiness of the two leads and sensational aspects of the boxing storyline. It can be assumed that this was how United Artists attempted to appeal to theaters in a variety of regions, including those in which negative attitudes toward Mexican Americans might preclude promotional materials that

focused heavily on issues of discrimination. It also provides a hint of how racial biases toward Latinos in different parts of the U.S. likely complicated possibilities for stardom for Latino and Latina actors throughout this era, at least in the eyes of film producers and distributors.

In the case of the promotional materials created for *The Ring*, some of the posters depict the two romantic leads in pulp-novel style drawings, such that the characters appear older and more sexually provocative than they are in the film (for instance, “Lucy” in the drawing is more mature and bosomy than Moreno, and has a knowing look on her face). In other posters, actual photos of Moreno and Rios are included. Even these photographs tend to depict Rios and Moreno in a sexually provocative pose from one moment of the film that misrepresents the general tone of their characters, however.

With respect to tag lines, the most politically progressive poster contains the tag line: “I was slaughtered to please the crowd! ... They call me “Dirty Yellow Mex! ... I’m not good enough for them—but my women are!” The poster most ambiguous in tone, which appeared in the *Hollywood Citizen-News* and other newspapers, on the other hand, included the tagline: “They call me ‘Dirty Mex’ but still they chase my women!” displayed in such a way that the words “Dirty Mex’ are particularly prominent (Sept. 17, 1952).

With respect to general reception to the film, critic’s reviews were often caught up with differing opinions on whether the film was heavy-handed or realistic in its take on discrimination. Regardless, Moreno was praised for her work. She was described as a natural and unpretentious actress by the *Los Angeles Times*, as a “very pretty girl who turns in a persuasively appealing job,” by the *Hollywood Reporter*, and as a “bright addition” by Howard McClay of the *Los Angeles Daily News*.

The general star publicity that Moreno received during this period, on the other hand, was tinged with ambiguity with respect to her Latin ethnicity.



Reporters remarked on their surprise that Moreno could speak English and marked her as a fiery exotic. Howard McClay, for example, describes Moreno in a 1952 column in the *Los Angeles Daily News*: “[I]t’s rather surprising to hear this pretty, black-haired Latin beauty rattle off the dialog [sic] like some doll who had been raised in Manhattan all her life. ... Rita, whose black eyes constantly remind you of her colorful and robust ancestry, would rather be an ordinary American on the screen than anything else.” He concluded the item on Moreno with, “Now don’t forget that free rumba lesson, kiddo” (Oct. 9, 1952). Another article on Moreno, this one in the *Los Angeles Daily News*, focused on Moreno’s purported dream to become a bullfighter (Oct. 26, 1952).

The next few years brought more of the same. Moreno received little promotion in these years and was increasingly typecast as a highly emotional and hypersexual ethnic. In the mid-fifties, virtually the only roles Moreno was offered were of poor and passionate non-white women, often Indian maidens or Polynesian princesses, who would do anything to be with the white man she loved, but who always lost him in the end to an ultimately more worthy white woman. As Robert Stam has said regarding the typical narrative construction of such characters in Hollywood Westerns, “North American ideology promoted myths of ... the doomed nature of love between white and Indian” (11). Within such constructions, Moreno's characters were always the ones that were doomed.

Moreno herself was quick to pan these roles with a variety of euphemisms in interviews over the years, calling them alternately “barefoot roles,” “Conchita Lolita roles” and the like. In an interview with Ally Acker, Moreno reported, “It took six years of therapy trying to get my ‘ethnic’ problems untangled. ... I’d get to the point where I’d feel great, really sure of myself, and then audition for an important part only to have the producer say, ‘Terrific. But really, honey, for this part we need a Mitzi Gaynor—we need an American’” (qtd. 114).

Apparently in these decades in Hollywood, Latinas with the aesthetic appearance of Moreno were imagined as fit to portray temporary romantic or sexual objects (as in *Toast of New Orleans* and *Cattle Town*, and many other films Moreno appeared in); servants (as in *Pagan Love Song*); or fiery and rambunctious roles (such as in the part Moreno would later play in *West Side Story*). In addition, a hierarchy of off-whiteness within the Hollywood imaginary apparently constricted opportunities for Asian and American Indian actresses, while offering Latinas such as Moreno opportunities only as pan-ethnics. Some of the films in which Moreno next played the ethnic, barefoot woman included Columbia's war drama *El Alamein* (1953), Paramount's jungle adventure film *Jivaro* (1954), in which she played islander Maroa, and Allied Artists' *Fort Vengeance* (1953), in which Moreno once again portrayed an American Indian maiden.

Moreno also received some unwanted, sensational publicity around this time because of the goings-on in her personal life. She was involved in an on-again, off-again relationship with actor Marlon Brando that often drew unwanted attention in the press. This coverage further positioned Moreno as a fiery and sensation-seeking ethnic. During a period of disillusionment with Brando, she also dated heir George Hormel. There was a well-publicized scandal when Hormel was arrested for possible marijuana possession while he was with Moreno, though he was later cleared of the charges, and Moreno also was cited for a physical altercation with a police officer when the arrest took place. The incident and subsequent trial resulted in a rash of negative publicity for Moreno, as did an overdose attempt after a breakup with Brando.

#### **MORENO'S "SEX AND INNOCENCE" PROMOTION**

Despite her struggles with her publicity and limited casting opportunities, Moreno continued to work steadily, mainly in B films such as *Ma and Pa Kettle*

on *Vacation* (1953) and in experimental television at a time when it wasn't considered particularly wise for aspiring film actors. Her television work led to some unexpected publicity, however, underscoring the oft-times whimsical nature of star publicity. Moreno experienced her most wide-reaching star publicity to date when she was unexpectedly chosen to grace the cover of *Life* magazine on March 1, 1954, as I describe further in this section. While this publicity helped Moreno get her next studio contract, with Twentieth Century-Fox, as a result it also became extremely difficult for Moreno to escape its associations in her star image in the coming years.

Rita Moreno received this career boost after she was chosen to be Ray Bolger's dancing partner for the pilot of a new series, *The Ray Bolger Show* (1954).<sup>17</sup> Television series were a new phenomenon at the time; *Life* magazine was devoting an issue to the trend. As a result, a *Life* photographer scouting television sets took pictures of Moreno on the job. The editors found her attractive and decided to feature her in their issue, with Lewis Dean taking photographs to accompany the story. Moreno's picture subsequently ended up on the cover of the issue. The publicity was star-making, though completely unexpected. Notably, the title of the cover story was "Rita Moreno, An Actress's Catalog of Sex and Innocence."

While the old adage "any publicity is good publicity" held true for Moreno in this instance, familiar tropes of the overtly sexualized Latina body played heavily into the story and its accompanying images. The photos and captions inside the issue related the "story" of how Moreno could easily express the desired range of an actress—or perhaps more specifically, of a Latina actress—in any acting audition. Her reported 'repertoire' ran the gamut from "All Innocence" to "Sexy-Wild," a dichotomy the builds strikingly on the Madonna-

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<sup>17</sup> Bolger, a song-and-dance man with roots in Vaudeville and long career in motion picture musicals, is perhaps best known for playing The Scarecrow in MGM's *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939.

whore binary that structures a great deal of female and particularly Latina film representation, as Clara E. Rodríguez has argued (“Visual Retrospective”). Described as a satire, nonetheless it is difficult to know if readers interpreted the photographs and captions as such in light of popular attitudes toward Latinas in the mid 1950s. The article included lines such as “Rita Moreno shows off slinking walk of ‘sophisticated’ [sic] actress” and “As a ‘sexy-wild’ actress she wiggles so much she can hardly walk” (65).

Moreno thus was sold as a rising star in this first major star promotion of her career, through publicity that was deeply structured by tropicalist tropes and emphasis on her body. And considering that Moreno’s reported range mainly ran the gamut from sexy to sexier, the dichotomy of sex and innocence was in fact subtly disputed within the story itself. Was it Moreno’s “innocence” that was just an act? The story seemed to playfully pose.

At the time that the *Life* issue came out, Moreno was in Mexico for the filming of Twentieth Century-Fox’s *Garden of Evil* (1954), playing a Mexican cantina singer, a role that was more of the same for Moreno but marked her singing debut in film. Moreno has credited *Garden* director Henry Hathaway as instrumental at this juncture in her career, highlighting how the choices made by directors and producers behind the scenes profoundly impact on their actors’ performances and thus their subsequent screen and star images.

According to Moreno, Hathaway spent a great deal of extra time on her two song numbers, had the stars stay on the set while she performed to provide valuable live reactions to aid her in her delivery, blocked her staging so that she was constantly doing something visually interesting, and otherwise helped her to greatly improve her performance in the film. “[Hathaway] did all this for me in the full awareness that Mr. Zanuck [Daryl Zanuck, then head of production at Twentieth Century-Fox] and all the important producers saw the rushes, to help

them notice me, to make me worthy of notice,” Moreno has asserted (qtd. in Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Dept. “Rita Moreno notes” 8).

Hathaway’s help paid off, as Daryl Zanuck was reportedly pleased with Moreno’s performance. Playing the firecracker card in the *Life* magazine story also had a payoff. Zanuck asked who Moreno was and wanted to put her under contract—as long as she could speak English. Apparently in the minds of Hollywood executives of the era, “Latina” still generally translated as “non-American” and thus non-English speaking. Moreno assured the studio brass that she in fact could speak English and quickly was signed to a contract. At the time she was 23 years old.

The *Life* cover story also resulted in a twist in the publicity for Moreno’s next film release, *The Yellow Tomahawk* (1954), which was produced independently and distributed by United Artists. In the Western, Moreno plays another Indian maiden. Her character, Honey Bear, is in love with an Indian scout played by Rory Calhoun, who in the end—unsurprisingly—falls in love with Peggy Castle’s character. Most of the United Artists promotional posters are dominated by a photo of Calhoun and Castle and the tagline (“An Indian Scout and a Blonde Wildcat... They Faced the Most Savage of All Indian Raids!”). Moreno’s name is included last of the five actors in the credits.

A small box is inserted prominently but somewhat incongruously in the bottom right corner of almost every poster, however. In the box is a head and shoulders photo of Moreno, wearing dark lipstick and with a seductive look (a photo actually used previously by United Artists to advertise *The Ring*). It was accompanied by the words, “See Rita Moreno: *Life*’s ‘Sex and Innocence’ cover girl!” In addition, exhibitors were encouraged in the press book to use an enlarged version of this poster of Moreno, advertised as the “sex and innocence” girl, who was “a good bet for full stardom in the very near future” (4).

With this promotional thrust, the pairing of sex and innocence, with innocence often downplayed, began to serve as the main theme in Moreno's star publicity. One illustration can be found in the various product tie-ins to *Yellow Tomahawk*. While Peggy Castle was paired with the Gotham Blouse, a staid, proper design, the product Rita Moreno was tied in with was Luc-Ray lingerie. The implication appears to be that United Artists felt the "sex" aspect of her new star image was more of a selling point than "innocence."

This dual promotional thrust also was particularly timely, given the sexual mores of the era. In a period when "nice girls" were expected to be chaste and only mildly interested in sex, promoting Moreno through the pairing of sex and innocence played well to male fantasies, as well as capitalizing on long-term historical tropes of seductive Latinas. By constructing Rita Moreno as a star who *looked* sexy but *played* innocent, she was construed as a fantasy sexual partner of great passion and free of typical inhibition—implying an enthusiastic sexual partner but not a suitable marriage partner—once one got past the mask of innocence.

At the onset of Moreno's new contract, the publicity machine at Twentieth Century-Fox orchestrated the first concerted star-making publicity on the part of a studio that Moreno had experienced up to that time. Dual (and dueling) images of sex and innocence prevailed in this star promotion during her tenure at the studio. A series of publicity photos were commissioned by the studio in 1954. In these stills and print coverage generated by Fox, Moreno is alternately portrayed as an innocent "Latina next door" and as a 1950s-style Latin vamp, fully exploiting the Latina-associated Madonna-whore binary previously mentioned.

Several Twentieth Century-Fox publicity photographs of Moreno promoted her as a star of the more innocent, ingenue variety. Moreover, many elements of the studio's promotional campaign seemed to have been taken straight from MGM's books during her tenure there with respect to emphasis on

her humble background and previous acting and performing experience. A biography that was written on Moreno for Twentieth Century-Fox in 1954, described her yet again as “vivacious little Rita Moreno” (Brand). Mention was made of Moreno making her professional debut as a child performer in Carmen Miranda garb. A new addition to Moreno’s official biography was a quiet critique, however, which presumably was prompted by Moreno herself, that she’d unfortunately been typecast in “bare-foot parts” in the past. But the Fox bio assured on that potentially controversial topic that “she doesn’t mind that too much” (Brand 3).

Other Fox publicity stills and materials construct Moreno conversely as a Latina vamp; photos such as one still of the actress inside a firecracker prop promoted Moreno primarily as a pin-up star. Eventually a majority of Moreno’s fan mail at this time, in fact, came from service men. Possible “pin-up titles” that are suggested by the studio’s publicity department in 1956 included “Sexy pixie, Puerto Rican Pepper Pot, Queen of the Home Show, Air Force ROTC Queen, Queen of Little Baseball, The Cheetah” and Chile Pepper” (Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Dept. “Rita Moreno Notes” 7). As a part of the constructed appeal that it was presumably hoped Moreno would have with the white male audience, Twentieth Century-Fox also stressed in her publicity that Moreno was interested in dating “Americans” rather than Latinos. Her 1954 biography ends with discussion of how Moreno “doesn’t go along with the way Latins treat, or mistreat, as she sees it, their women. ... So she plans to marry an American” (Brand 3).

Perhaps not surprising, considering this construction of Moreno’s star image, the films that she starred in during her tenure at Twentieth Century-Fox included more barefoot roles; these films included *Untamed* (1955), *Seven Cities of Gold* (1955) and *The Lieutenant Wore Skirts* (1955). *Untamed* was perhaps the most spectacular of the three, a Technicolor adventure film set in South Africa.

Moreno plays a biracial African girl in the film; Richard Egan plays her love interest, at least until Susan Hayward comes along (“but she doesn’t want him. I stick with him until he dies,” Moreno reported in 1956 [qtd. in Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Dept. “Rita Moreno Notes” 4]). The *New York Post*, describing her as a “fiery love machine,” railed the studio for not giving her a meatier role (March 2, 1955).

*Seven Cities of Gold* offered Moreno perhaps the most notoriously stereotypical role of her film career. In the film she once again plays a barefoot American Indian woman, Ula, who loses her man to a white woman. Moreno has described the scene in which she later commits suicide (including the infamous line, as parodied by Moreno, “Why joo no luv Ula no more?”) as a classic in the “Yonkee peeg” school of screenwriting and acting that she so often had to endure (Suntree 56). In a change of pace, in *The Lieutenant Wore Skirts* (1955), a play-on-gender roles military comedy starring Tom Ewell and Sheree North, Moreno got to act a little and show her ability to do comedy. In the film she does an apt and humorous imitation of Marilyn Monroe, prompting *Variety* to comment, “Rita Moreno captures the fancy in a girl-upstairs takeoff from *The Seven-Year Itch*” (Jan. 1, 1956).

Moreno also was cast as Princess Tuptim in Twentieth Century-Fox’s musical spectacle *The King and I* (1956). A more glamorous role in a bigger budget film than she usually got a shot at, the role of Tuptim was almost an accident of casting, Moreno has indicated in interviews. As a studio player, she had read the part for the male actors during auditions. When two different actresses slated for the role subsequently dropped out, one of them Dorothy Dandridge, Moreno eventually was offered the part. Interestingly, the studio apparently was not concerned with casting an Asian actress in the role, pointing to the even more constrained opportunity that Asian and Asian American actors experienced in Hollywood in this time period. This role gave Moreno a chance to



show another side with respect to her acting, but was not particularly demanding and was not heavily promoted with respect to Moreno's performance.

#### **PARAMOUNT'S CAMPAIGN: THE SHAPING OF A LATINA STAR BODY**

The tropicalist associations of Latin Spitfire imagery continued to dominate Latina star promotion in this post-studio era, moreover, as the next development in Moreno's career, a brief period of star promotion on the part of Paramount studio, demonstrates. Paramount commissioned a series of publicity photographs of the actress in 1955, apparently to promote the musical adventure film *The Vagabond King* (1956). These photographs capitalize heavily on tropes of the hypersexual and seductive Latina body, and particularly highlight the deliberate *construction* of such a body in the promotional efforts related to Rita Moreno, as I discuss below. I subsequently trace how this spitfire image carried over to later print publicity promoting Moreno as a star in 1955 and 1956.

In *The Vagabond King*, an operetta centered in France during King Louis' reign, Moreno played Huguette, a fiery tavern "wench" (as she is described in the film). Huguette is in love with the rogue bandit hero of the film, but dies just in time for him to win the heart of his true love, the king's more worthy, Anglo-Saxon daughter. With this role Moreno once again portrayed a character that cannot be considered marriageable because of her lesser whiteness, and instead serves to provide titillation and conflict to the narrative. In the film Moreno as Huguette leads several incongruously Latin-inspired musical numbers before her death, most notably a song titled "Viva La Us!"

The Paramount publicity photos strongly incorporate stereotypes of fiery Latinas and racialized notions of erotic Latina bodies. For example, Moreno is photographed kicking up her heels in a flouncy Spanish dress and lounging in baby-doll pajamas, amidst flimsy scarves, and wearing strapless dresses and a come-hither look. Most interesting, racialized body concepts are evident in the

touch-up marks on the original photos, which were located in the Rita Moreno files at the Margaret Herrick library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The pen marks and instructions stamped on the back of the photos, communication between employees in Paramount's publicity department, indicate how the photos were to be airbrushed and/or altered. In numerous photos, pen marks instruct photo finishers to doctor the photos to give the dancer-lean Moreno a more prominent bosom, presumably the better to play up her sexy Latin image.

Other marks indicate places to cover up Moreno's upper thighs or buttocks. Interestingly, this area of the body was "too hot" for full exposure at this point in Hollywood history, likely indicative of Hays Code-related double standards regarding parts of the female anatomy considered appropriate for public consumption, an anatomical conundrum worth further study in another research project. More notable for this study, Moreno's studio-enhanced *décolleté* in Paramount's publicity campaign points to the packaging of Moreno as a highly sexualized spitfire, including enhancing her appearance when it didn't embody such traditional expectations. While undoubtedly the appearance of actors and actresses of all ethnicities were and are enhanced in a similar manner, it seems no coincidence that a Latina's appearance was so carefully altered in this fashion. This also is not to imply that Paramount was the only studio that enhanced Moreno's appearance in this fashion, it merely was the only studio that preserved such original photographs in an archive accessible to researchers.

The entertainment news media in 1955 and 1956 further cranked up the heat with respect to the Latin vamp discourse that came to be associated with Moreno's star image in these years. The studios set up interviews for Moreno with entertainment writers; the resulting articles reported such things as "[Moreno's] alleged 24-hour use of perfume (even in bed), her temper, her love of earrings and high-heeled shoes with straps" (Suntree 55-56). Moreno also was described by newspaper and fan magazine columnists as one of the most eligible

single starlets in Hollywood, while a 1955 *Los Angeles Times* story claimed that police officers, polled unofficially, said that Moreno was the star to whom it would be most fun to give a traffic ticket.

This eroticisation of Moreno's star image during her tenure at Twentieth Century-Fox is particularly striking when compared to Dolores Del Rio's star image in prior decades. While Del Rio was given the opportunity to play women of a wide variety of ethnicities in the late 1920s, some of which heavily exploited her sexuality in the pre-Code era, it appears that the socially available and enthusiastic body was the only public image afforded to a Latina star by the mid-1950s. This shift reflected changes of the times that actresses of all ethnicities faced in light of the increasingly youthful and male movie audience, but does not fully account for the drastically different opportunities and promotional campaigns that the two actresses experienced. Moreno herself has admitted that she sometimes played up her fiery Latina image for publicity, particularly as it seemed to often be the only way that she could get press coverage:

I played the role to the hilt, but at least it got me attention. It amused and charmed people. 'Isn't she something! What a firecracker! If that's all I could get then that's what I settled for. There was never a possibility of being anything else in my head, in my perception. The people around didn't help, the society didn't help (qtd. in Suntree 49).

Moreno's working-class background and reported tumultuous relationship with Marlon Brando additionally added to her spitfire image. Particularly telling with respect to the changes of the times, these articles delved far further into her private life than had the coverage of Dolores Del Rio had when Del Rio was possibly having an affair with Edwin Carewe in the late 1920s. She was described in other press coverage as perhaps unfeminine or less cultured because of her Latin ethnicity as well. One article on Moreno in *Look* was titled "It's Hard To Be a Lady" (Allen), while another emphasized that she had "the looks of any pretty American girl." After listing her measurements ("5-2-1/2, 101 pounds,

34-25-35”), the reporter mentioned that she was taking a night class in literature at UCLA as a part of her interest in “self-improvement” (Skolsky).

There also was a marked contrast in the publicity of the two stars with respect to the rhetoric of work and ambition in their star discourse. For example, a journalist for the Los Angeles Times asserted that Moreno, a “Puerto Rican firecracker,” was taking it upon herself to send out “pin-up shots personally to columnists and editors,” not wanting to wait for Twentieth Century-Fox publicity personnel (Louis Berg, Feb. 13, 1955). This stood in sharp contrast with the discourse that surrounded Dolores Del Rio during her introduction to the moviegoing public as a financially privileged young woman who tried out movie acting as a lark, never gave in to unladylike ambition, and in general never had to “work” to further her career. This alternate construction for Rita Moreno highlights both the initiative that Moreno took to promote herself, absent adequate industry promotion, as well as how her actions deviated from prescribed channels through which actresses in Hollywood were expected to pursue stardom.

#### **LOOKING FOR “INTEGRITY AND DIGNITY,” AND *WEST SIDE STORY***

Moreno was able to play and overplay Latin stereotypes with aplomb, but she never stopped wanting more challenging roles and developed a keen awareness of the limitations she faced in Hollywood as a Latina. As I explore further below, in reaction Rita Moreno began to work in theater in New York and London in the late 1950s. The opportunity and success that she experienced eventually brought her back to film and her Oscar-winning performance as Anita in *West Side Story* (1961), a role which arguably offered Moreno her widest public exposure to date. Her other film role of 1961, that of Rosa Zacarias in *Summer and Smoke*, however, hinted at the intransigence of Latina harlot imagery in Hollywood film at this time.

Moreno has reported in interviews that she struggled a great deal with her self-esteem in the late 1950s with respect to blocks she continued experienced to being cast in film roles because of her Hispanic appearance. Roles that showcased her body over her mind and posed her as a temporary sex object were often the only opportunities available to her. She finally made a decision only to play Latinas “with integrity and dignity. No more wild, Chiquita Banana mamas who would get what was coming to them. No more fooling around with the leading lady’s hunk only to get dumped” (Acker 114).

Moreno, tired of the lack of prospects, turned her attention to theater, performing in both New York and London. She began a successful stage career, playing, among other roles, Annie Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker*, Lola in *Damn Yankees*, Sally Bowles in *I Am a Camera*, and Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls*, a trajectory which highlights the greater openness in the realm of theater to casting Latinos in white roles at this point in time, even while the theater world was hardly non-racist. This work, and the consistent attention and respect she earned for it, led to her eventual return to work in Hollywood and later her role in *West Side Story*.

The success of *West Side Story* brought Moreno a great deal of exposure as an actress and star. A retelling of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* was set in New York City amidst a turf war between the Sharks, a Puerto Rican gang, and the Jets, an Anglo gang consisting primarily of second-generation Polish immigrants. While the lead role of Puerto Rican heroine Maria was played by Anglo actress Natalie Wood,<sup>18</sup> Moreno beat out five other actresses for the role of second female lead, Anita, for which she subsequently won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress.

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<sup>18</sup> Moreno has commented that she had been given the opportunity to audition for the role of Maria in the Broadway version (which subsequently was played by Puerto Rican actress Chita Rivera), but decided not to, and that she was too old for the role by the time it was in production as a film.

The film in fact garnered ten Oscars, including Best Picture, as well as proving to be one of the most successful musicals in film history, both in the U.S. and internationally. According to Monaco, citing *Variety*, “the domestic box office success of the film was still so phenomenal into the middle of the decade that in 1966 [producer Walter] Mirish turned down an offer from NBC of over \$3 million for a single telecast of the picture” (160).<sup>19</sup> Critics in particular were pleased with Moreno’s performance in the role of the recent Puerto Rican immigrant who aimed to make the most of her life in New York City. *Variety* praised Moreno’s performance, asserting that she “score[d] hugely in the role” (Sept. 13, 1961). Ironically, in the exhibitors’ press book for the film, Moreno is notably not emphasized. Aside from the biography included for all of the leads, she appears only in a few photos in dance numbers with the ensemble. Perhaps the best-known photo of Moreno in the film is from a musical number which she leads, “America,” a popular song that, reminiscent of Dolores Del Rio’s turn as Ramona as discussed in Chapter 2, marked Moreno as not-quite American in the public imagination.

The film itself is a text full of ambiguity with respect to its representation of Puerto Ricans. Pérez has argued in a critique of the film that it reified previous negative stereotypes in its portrayal of Puerto Ricans as gang members and recent immigrants, while Sandoval-Sánchez additionally has criticized the film’s mythical retelling of social history (“A Puerto Rican Reading”). Moreover, given the casting of Natalie Wood and George Chakiris in the lead Latino roles, the production reiterated the frustrating tradition by which Latino actors were not considered good enough to even portray their “own” starring roles.

Additionally, Moreno played another fiery Latina role that year in *Summer and Smoke* (1961), a film based on Tennessee Williams’s play of the same name. In the film Moreno portrays Rosa Zacarias, the wild daughter of a Southern

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<sup>19</sup> *Variety* Sept. 21, 1966, p. 1.

town's casino owner and once more, little more than an inviting Latina body. Rosa wears black, drinks, gambles, and speaks her mind, and manages to catch the eye of the confused romantic lead, Johnny. She is the always-available ethnic Other, who provides Johnny with respite from his colorless existence, a paradigm which Shohat and Stam reference in their discussion of tropes of empire in Hollywood film. Ultimately, however, Johnny must leave Rosa. She doesn't possess the emotional imbalance of the female lead in the narrative, but because of her background and presumably her ethnicity, she is damaged goods. Such also was the case for the character of Dolores in *So Young, So Bad*, Moreno's first film, and for many of the roles Moreno had portrayed since.

#### **AFTER THE OSCAR: NO ADVANTAGE TO WINNING FOR A *HISPANIC* ROLE**

Rita Moreno found after winning the Oscar that her career opportunities did not noticeably improve, as I discuss further below. She instead continued to be offered fiery Latina roles. In reaction, Moreno chose to work mainly in theater, taking only an occasional film role. She also was outspoken about her dissatisfaction with the obstructions that she encountered to furthering her career in Hollywood, a pioneer with respect to speaking out on these issues. Moreno eventually took a role with the children's television series *The Electric Company*, opting out of film acting for much of the 1970s.

Rita Moreno has related to interviewers that she originally was optimistic about the impact that winning the Oscar would have on her career. She hoped it would lead to offers for the compelling, complex roles that she wanted to portray. But Moreno realized in retrospect that the role of Anita would not help her gain greater status or increase her opportunities in Hollywood. As she said in 1995, "I had a star making role in *West Side Story*, but it was a *Hispanic* star making role" (*Bronze Screen* interview).

Given societal stereotypes, it appears many in the Hollywood community did not grasp that Moreno was in fact acting in this “Hispanic role.” So rather than being offered a range of Oscar-caliber roles that would further test her acting chops, she was only offered similar, stereotypical Latina roles. She told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter that in the few months after the Academy Awards, she’d received only this shopping list of offers: Interview requests from several magazines that wanted to do a story on her (if she’d talk about her relationship with Marlon Brando), seven offers to star in independent films—three of which wanted her to star only if she’d help finance them, product endorsement offers for lipstick and margarine, and six marriage proposals (Suntree).

Associated in the public imagination with Hispanic gang member roles and a stormy romance with an out-of-control male star, Moreno found she was more typecast than ever. The lack of change in Moreno’s career options after winning the Oscar highlights the importance of viewing the Academy Awards as a separate and not necessarily equal system of status in Hollywood, particularly for non-white stars. As such, winning an Oscar tends to provide greater mobility only for those stars who already possess it within the traditional star system.

Moreno was not afraid to voice her disappointment in having to embody and thus perpetuate Latin stereotypes in her film roles; articles on the star at this juncture often took up this outspokenness as their main topic. In this time period Moreno also began to get involved in the anti-war and civil rights movements, which included advocacy efforts in Hollywood aimed at increasing diversity in front of and behind the camera. For example, in 1962 Moreno spoke out in a letter to the editor in *Daily Variety* against actress Bette Davis, who had criticized activist efforts for increased minority representation in Hollywood film. She argued that Davis didn’t speak for everyone in Hollywood, adding, “[S]o long as any American citizen or group of citizens is deprived of dignity and freedom, then my own freedom and sense of personal dignity are also inevitably threatened”



(July 30, 1962). She called for ending “Hollywood JimCrowism ... in all its aspects,” referring to the aforementioned system of marginalization and confinement to menial roles that actors of color generally still faced (*The Puerto Rico Herald*).

Moreno in many respects was fighting against the tide in her efforts. Despite increased protest on the part of civil rights groups and individuals focused on media participation and representation, the film industry ultimately tread lightly with respect to addressing these issues. As Cortés points out, film producers often eliminated Latino and Latina characters from their films in this period in order to avoid potential criticism from advocacy groups; many actors as a result had an even more difficult time finding work than they had in the past. Moreover, even in this age of social consciousness, few films directly addressed issues of racial discrimination. According to Monaco, “feature films of the 1960s ... skirted the civil rights movement. ... For critics and commentators who demanded ‘engaged art’ or who expected feature films to respond directly to the great social and political causes of the age, Hollywood was a lost cause” (263).

Because of the lack of challenging or dignified roles offered, Moreno acted only sporadically in films in the sixties, appearing as a Filipina guerrilla fighter and love interest in *Cry of Battle* in 1963, as a criminal involved in the kidnapping of an heiress (with former boyfriend Marlon Brando) in *Night of the Following Day* (1969), in the detective film *Marlowe* (1969), as the girlfriend of a single father in the Puerto Rican-themed *Popi* (1969), and as a prostitute in *Carnal Knowledge* (1971). While these parts offered variation from Moreno’s former barefoot roles and more active subjectivity than in the past, they still tended to be fairly peripheral to the narratives and thus did not greatly propel her film career.

Of these films, *Popi* was unique in that it offered Moreno her first role in a Puerto Rican-themed film, a development which arguably reflected the rise of

consciousness and pride of the Puerto Rican and Latino communities, as well as rising interest in ethnic-inflected films in Hollywood in the late 1960s. The lead role, however, was portrayed by Jewish actor Alan Arkin in brownface. Moreno's character is one of the most positive in the film, an ambivalent tale of a Puerto Rican father who tries to pass his sons off as Cuban refugees so that they will be adopted by a wealthy family. Even so, the role offered little for Moreno to do aside from make coffee for Arkin's character and look attractive (*Variety* had commented, "If any viewer believes that Arkin would turn down such a doll, they'll believe the rest of the story" [Jan. 1, 1969]). Moreno was not any more likely to be cast in starring roles in Hollywood in this time period even while critical respect for her talent remained high, because the films in which she appeared were mainly low budget and did not turn substantial profits.

Throughout this time Moreno was highly lauded for her work in theater, however. She had moved to London, then settled in New York, where she threw herself again into a successful theater career. In 1965, she had wed Lenny Gordon, a physician specializing in cardiology; Gordon eventually became Moreno's manager. They later had a daughter, Fernanda. Her desire to spend more time with her daughter played a part in Moreno taking a job with the children's television program *The Electric Company*, in 1970, when she was asked to join by original ensemble members Bill Cosby and Morgan Freeman.

Produced by The Children's Television Workshop, the show and its multicultural cast had the goals of increasing children's reading skills and self-esteem, which dovetailed well with Moreno's values. She told Neil Hickey of *TV Guide*:

I am Latin and I know what it is to feel alone and ignored because you are different. When you are ignored, you have lost your sense of identity. So I can be the Latin on this show and my presence there can tell a lot of children and some adults, "yes, we do exist, we have value" (20).

She ended up staying for five of *The Electric Company*'s six seasons. Meanwhile, she also performed in musical and theater endeavors. She was awarded a Grammy in 1972 for an ensemble-effort soundtrack recording of *Electric Company* songs, and a Tony in 1975 for the role of Googie Gomez, a part written especially for her in the play *The Ritz*, later remade as a film, which will be discussed further in the following section. This was followed by two Emmy wins, in 1977 and 1978, for performances on episodes of the television programs *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981) and *The Rockford Files* (1974-1980), respectively. With her first Emmy win, Moreno joined the elite ranks of only four performers in the U.S. to have won all of the top awards in the fields of theater, film, music, and television.

#### **“THUMBING MY NOSE AT ALL THOSE HOLLYWOOD WRITERS:” MORENO PLAYS GOOGIE GOMEZ**

Given this retrospective survey of Rita Moreno's early career, the role of Googie Gomez, which Moreno played in *The Ritz* both on Broadway and in the film based on the play, offers an illustrative 1970s counterpoint to the typecasting and stereotype-laden star promotion that Moreno faced in the previous two decades. The tale, a mistaken-identity sex farce set in a gay bathhouse in Manhattan, offered Moreno what she has described as the role of a lifetime in the form of Googie. I discuss Moreno's performance below, particularly with respect to the question of creative agency and the implications that such a role have with respect to Latina representation and Latina stardom.

A flamboyant, aspiring Puerto Rican singer hoping to gain fame via the bathhouse route that gave Bette Midler her start, Googie Gomez is a caricature who constantly calls attention her own outrageousness and thus to that of the societal assumptions upon which the character is centrally based. The role in fact was written with Rita Moreno in mind by playwright Terrence McNally after

seeing Moreno do an impromptu, humorous performance at a party of an eager and flamboyantly untalented Puerto Rican woman singing “Everything’s Coming Up Roses.” From these beginnings, the role of Googie Gomez was a perfect, flamboyant showpiece for Moreno’s talents. Critics subsequently praised Moreno’s performance as “‘pure beauty,’ ‘wonderfully atrocious,’ and ‘a comic earthquake,’” as one *New York Times* reviewer summarized (Considine 1). Moreno later reprised her role in the film, receiving again almost universally exuberant praise for her performance.

Moreno told Shaun Considine that playing the role was cathartic to her, in offering a chance to “thumb her nose” at Hollywood writers who had, in seriousness rather than humor, previously written demeaning Latina and other ethnic roles which she subsequently had had to portray:

By playing Googie, I am thumbing my nose at all those Hollywood writers responsible for lines like “You Yankee peeg, you rape my seester, I keel you!” Those writers were *serious* and Terrence is not. All the characters in “The Ritz” are outrageous caricatures and that’s how I play Googie, outrageously! (5).

In a sense, it can be argued that Moreno exploded the stereotypes of the fiery Latina and other sacrificing pan-ethnics with her bold and bawdy performance.

Given that Googie Gomez roles were not common in Hollywood, Moreno continued to put little stock in furthering her film career and instead focused more on other entertainment arenas. For Moreno, these choices offered freedom and relief in a number of respects. In an interview with Ally Acker some years later, Moreno enthusiastically reported her interest in producing and otherwise working to promote positive images of Latinos in the media. She was working on a documentary about the making of the 1954 docudrama *Salt of the Earth* at the time.

Moreno has continued to work in film, television, and theater in the last decades, in the last decade in such films as *I Like it Like That* (1994) and *The Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998) and in one-woman cabaret shows in a number of cities. More recently, Moreno has been working consistently in the role of Sister Peter Marie on HBO's critically acclaimed series *Oz* (1997+), a hard-hitting drama about the inmates and employees of a maximum-security prison. Moreno's intensity and talent have proven to be a solid match for the role of the tough prison psychiatrist on the series, which *Variety* declared in its initial review "pushe[s] TV's content envelope in daring ways" (July 20, 1997). Moreno has raved about the role, and particularly its complexity, in interviews. "She is a very religious person, very pious, simple but complex, tough and very compassionate." Moreno told Valerie Menard in *Hispanic* magazine in December 2001. "She's just a whole bunch of contradictions..." ("Radiant Rita").

Tom Fontana, creator and executive producer of the series, apparently created the role with Moreno in mind. "I was really extremely flattered," Menard quotes. "There was no script. I just took his word for it and, by God, we're entering our sixth season and it's an astonishing show and I'm very proud to be a part of it, to be on it, and to work with such amazing actors" ("Radiant Rita").

Moreno recently celebrated her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and has continues to pursue an active career, as well as serving as a spokeswoman on the topic of osteoporosis after learning that she herself was suffering from low bone mass, a precursor to the disease. She lives in New York several months each year to shoot *Oz* episodes, and the rest of the year with her husband, daughter, and grandchildren in Berkeley, California, what she calls the "best of all worlds" ("Ask Marilyn" April 4, 2000).

## CONCLUSIONS

As I describe in this chapter, many patterns of casting and promotion that affected Latinas in the 1930s continued to hold sway throughout the studio era and well into the 1950s and '60s. As this case study of Rita Moreno illustrates, for Latinas these decades were marked by a continuing confinement to limited stardom through the continuation of a number of key industrial traditions. These included the pairing of Latinidad in film story worlds with music and dance, the refusal to cast Latinas in white roles while also routinely casting them as “all-purpose ethnics,” and the increasing sexualization of Latina characters and star bodies in Hollywood film and star publicity. In addition, garnering sustained and substantive star promotion became all but impossible for Latinas in this time period, when only “all-American” actresses were considered worthy of such financial and industrial investment. I elaborate here on each of these traditions and their impact on Latina stardom in this time period.

First, in the studio and post-studio era, as was the case after the rise of sound film, Latinas had almost no opportunity to break into the industry except as dancers or singers. Latinas in this manner were often reduced to body, movement, and voice. As Rita Moreno discovered, the challenge that Latina actors with dance and singing abilities then faced, however, was being seen as more than merely entertaining or titillating bodies or voices in their film roles and star promotion.

In a manner similar to what Del Rio experienced in the thirties, the stardom of Rita Moreno and other Hollywood Latinas of the post-studio era was hampered as well by a lack of range in the roles they were offered. These overwhelmingly were heavily stereotypical, fiery ethnic characters, without the upper-class elegance that had at times tempered Del Rio's roles in the 1930s. Such female characters generally served as temporary love interests of the hero, who “naturally” soon fell in love with a presumably more worthy white woman.

Aside from the obvious denigration of such roles, they also offered little opportunity for proving star appeal to audiences and thus to moving up within the Hollywood star system.

Clearly, Hollywood's unwritten rules of casting generally forbid Latinas from portraying "white" characters in this time period, even while they were cast as assorted ethnics, with or without brownface makeup. This paradigm was maintained by an unacknowledged but nevertheless ubiquitous color line in Hollywood, which Dolores Del Rio also had run up against in her sound film career, which confined Latinos to a limited stardom and often obstructed non-white actors of other ethnic backgrounds from having careers at all. Meanwhile, the sanctity of "American" femininity and national beauty ideals were protected within film narratives and the Hollywood star system.

As Moreno's career illustrates, moreover, receiving publicity was a double-edged sword for Latinas in post-studio Hollywood. Latina star images took on a more overtly sexualized and body-focused tone in this time period, as the promotional campaigns used to publicize Moreno's films illustrate. This was particularly the case as the Production Code began to weaken in power and the film industry actively competed with television for the young adult and youth audience. In this regard, Moreno was ultimately hampered in her desire for greater stardom by an emphasis in her Hollywood star promotion on American tropes of Latinas as sexy, fickle, and passionate bodies. She was constructed as highly emotional and potentially naughty, the 'Sex and Innocence' Girl whose innocence wasn't taken particularly seriously, to the extent that there was little range in the roles she was offered. These tropes held such sway that it appears her own studios and management didn't know any other way to promote Moreno, even after her Academy Award win.

Such marketing of Moreno as a young starlet stands in particular contrast with Dolores Del Rio's elegant image in the 1920s and 1930s, an illustration both

of the differing sexual mores of the two eras and of how Del Rio's wealthy background softened the typical Hollywood Latina star publicity. And while Anglo actresses also at times experienced similar "cheesecake" marketing in the post-World War II period, with Betty Grable, Jane Russell, and Marilyn Monroe's pin-up posters vivid illustrations, Latinas had no opportunity to be marketed in any other manner in this era. Rita Moreno's studio-enhanced décolleté in the Paramount publicity photos highlights the extent to which tropicalist tropes defined Latina star promotion in this period. In the case of Moreno, her physical attributes were enhanced to better market her to the American public, her sexuality her main cachet.

Moreno acknowledges that she milked Latin spitfire myths for as much publicity as possible in this early stage of her career, which possibly encouraged the typecasting that she continued to experience. However, this situation did not improve for Moreno after winning the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in 1962. If anything, it proved how entrenched stereotypical notions of Latinidad were in Hollywood at the time. Moreno eventually chose to opt out of a major film career in the 1960s in order to portray Latinas with "dignity and integrity."

Rita Moreno's outspokenness and later achievements began to challenge these paradigms, moreover, posing the possibility of a Latina star who could be as well known for her talent as for assumed sexual desirability within the overwhelmingly white story worlds of Hollywood film. In this manner, Moreno's many accolades in theater and television in the sixties and seventies cumulatively provided the fodder for the rise of a new paradigm of Latina stardom through which other Latinas would be provided with greater opportunity and more diverse roles in Hollywood film in subsequent years.

The progress that Moreno made in her career undoubtedly could not have been a disservice to subsequent Latinas in Hollywood, such as Julie Carmen, Mercedes Ruehl, Elizabeth Peña and eventually Jennifer Lopez. Latina actors



also were to benefit from industry and social developments of the next decade, including the rise of Latino civil rights movements and media advocacy and the birth of Latino filmmaking, such that traditional Hollywood paradigms with respect to Latino representation, casting, and stardom would begin to be challenged.

Moreno's portrayal of über-spitfire Googie Gomez on Broadway and in film in the 1970s serves as a vivid illustration of how ruptures to the status quo in fact became a possibility in this time period. The creation and Moreno's performance of Googie, a character which drew its humor from the skewering of traditional Latina stereotypes, in addition calls attention to the power of the creative processes of screenwriting, directing, and acting in the construction not only of Latina characters but also of Latina stars beginning in the 1970s. . In the following chapter I discuss these developments further, bringing this project up to the present day with a focus on contemporary actress and multi-media performer Jennifer Lopez .

## Chapter 4

### Crossing Over (and Beyond) the Latina Body:

#### Jennifer Lopez in Contemporary Hollywood

Almost three decades after Rita Moreno turned from film projects to spend a protracted period working with *The Electric Company* ensemble, the posterior of another Puerto Rican actress, Jennifer Lopez, was splashed across two pages of *Entertainment Weekly*, as previously mentioned, her rise in status as a Hollywood film star curiously marked through images and discourse that focused on her curvy body and rounded rear end. Discussion of Lopez's body in fact dominated her promotional publicity during her crossover into the Hollywood star system and global imagination in late 1998, a phenomenon that will be explored in this chapter.

This was just the beginning for Jennifer Lopez, however. This publicity was quickly followed by new media ventures, including a successful career as a singer and music video artist, a L'Oreal spokesmodel contract, and the launching of a clothes line and film production company. While Jennifer Lopez initially embodied the phenomenon of Latina crossover, as this case study will document, she also arguably has grown beyond it as her star image and star-related franchise have carved out a larger piece of the synergistic pie.

Lopez has by many accounts ascended to superstar status within the Hollywood industries as she has evolved into "J.Lo," a heavily marketed "multimedia siren," as *Vanity Fair* described her in December 1999. She currently is the highest paid Latina in Hollywood, earning an asking price of \$12 million for her upcoming role in *Gigli* (2003), at a time when there still is a

paucity of Latina actresses even considered for speaking roles in films. News accounts report that Lopez also is the first person to have had the number-one box-office film in release at the same time as the top-selling non-soundtrack album, as was the case when *The Wedding Planner* and *J.Lo*, Lopez's second album, both debuted in January 2001.<sup>1</sup> *J.Lo* also was the top-selling album in Canada, Puerto Rico, Central America, Argentina, Chile, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Greece, according to *Business Wire* (Jan. 31, 2001), highlighting Lopez's unprecedented global promotion, such as has not been experienced by a Latina in Hollywood film since Dolores Del Rio's heyday.

In 2001, Lopez's growing status and power in the entertainment industries were officially marked by *Entertainment Weekly*, which included Lopez among its "101 Most Powerful People in Hollywood" (Oct. 26, 2001). Weighing in at Number 75, Lopez was the only Latino included in the rankings. While such a tally is by no means scientific, Lopez's inclusion arguably confirms that in the eyes of the Hollywood power elite, Lopez has entered their ranks as an American star rather than merely a Latina star. Lopez also has become a dominant figure in the realm of celebrity news, with a pervasive presence on the covers of and inside popular magazines and tabloids, in entertainment news, and on Internet sites.

Because of her proven popularity with diverse audiences and substantial industry backing, Jennifer Lopez provides a prime case study of Latina film stardom of the 1990s and present day, as well as of the present climate toward Latinas in Hollywood and the broader popular culture. This case study offers unique challenges in comparison to the prior case studies, however, particularly as research on contemporary stardom is necessarily "less grounded in the kinds of established understandings distance and time provide," as Negra explains with respect to her own work on contemporary stars (136).

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in various sources, including *Entertainment Weekly*, Oct. 26, 2001, p. 76.

There are empirical facts that ground this speculation, however. For one, the growing Latino population has begun to capture the attention of film studios. As discussed in Chapter 1, Latinos, now totaling more 12 percent of the total population, have become that largest non-white population in the U.S. Latinos also are more likely than any other ethnic group to go to the movies, which has given their box office dollar more clout. Even though on average Latino families are economically less well off than their white and African American counterparts (with an annual income of \$29,976 in 1997, in comparison to the national average of \$39,926),<sup>2</sup> Latinos spend money on “family entertainment” at a rate that is higher than their proportion in the overall population. According to the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, on average Latino families spend \$1,055 annually on entertainment.<sup>3</sup> In California, home of the film industry, Latinos also now make up more than half of the moviegoing audience. These developments in mind, it is important at this juncture to explore whether the star system is necessarily changing as entertainment producers now presumably hope their films and stars will appeal to Latinos in their audience.

This exploration is empirically grounded as well through critical consideration of previously established patterns in Latina star promotion, particularly what has been gleaned from the previous two case studies. The social and media landscape that Latino and Latina acting hopefuls face today is one that is drastically different from the Hollywood that Dolores Del Rio experienced in the 1920s-1940s and Rita Moreno experienced in the 1950s and '60s. While the New Hollywood has created opportunities for Latinas, many challenges to Latina stardom have continued unabated as well. Similar to Del Rio and Moreno, the star image of Jennifer Lopez is rife with paradox and ambiguity with respect with

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* “Money Income in the United States: 1997.”

<sup>3</sup> “Missing in Action: Latinos In and Out of Hollywood,” 2. The authors, Pachon et al, cite the U.S. Bureau of Labor, National Consumer Expenditure Survey of 1994-1997.

how ethnicity has played into her star image and conversely how her appearance has been shaped and utilized in her star promotion. The emphasis on Lopez's body in her press coverage despite her rising status is just one such paradoxical element.

Other questions can be raised regarding Lopez's physical image since this crossover period in her career. In 1999, as I discuss further in this case study, Lopez underwent a physical transformation that some have described as a whitening of her image. Moreover, since that time she subsequently has come to sport radically different ethnic looks in the photo sessions and personal appearances that comprise her image as a media celebrity. What can be made of Lopez's 1999 transformation, as well the ethnic slipperiness in the construction of her star image since, and how do notions of *Latinidad* figure in to these dynamics?

In the following sections, I review the social and industrial developments that have influenced Latino and Latina casting and stardom in the last few decades. This includes discussion of sociohistorical shifts that have had an impact on Latinos in the U.S. since the seventies, the rise of New Hollywood and related film industry trends, the dawning of Latino- and other ethnic-produced media forms and awareness of the Latino audience, and the recent construction of Latino crossover stardom. Finally, my case study of Jennifer Lopez will serve to illustrate these developments since the 1990s in particular.

### **NEW HOPE, NEW BORDERS: U.S. LATINOS SINCE THE 1970S**

As Latinos have grown in numbers in the last few decades, they have experienced both the entrenchment of previously existing social problems and social progress on several fronts, as scholars of Mexican American and Puerto Rican history such as Acuña (*Occupied*), Richard Griswold del Castillo and Arnoldo De León, and Clara E. Rodríguez ("Economic Survival") have

documented. These developments, which I explore in further detail below, include continuing problems of Latino poverty, unemployment and high school recidivism. On the other hand, Latinos have experienced progressive shifts as well in the last few decades, including a fruitful peak in Chicano and Latino social activism, a renaissance of Latino-produced art forms, including the birth of Latino filmmaking, and the growing recognition and status of the Latino market and vote in the U.S. Simultaneous to these developments, Latinos also have experienced a backlash against this progress and growth, in the form of “culture wars” and anti-Latino rhetoric and legislation, however.

The continuing and/or worsening of social problems for U.S. Latinos are of particular concern. Poverty, unemployment, and high school dropout in fact were higher among Latinos in 1990 than in 1970.<sup>4</sup> “Voluntary” segregation, which has included the continuing growth of suburbs, abandonment of the inner city by middle-class whites, and other ethnic segregation of housing and schools, also has contributed to a continuing “system of social apartness,” as Menchaca describes it, that has reinforced the economic inequities that many Latinos face currently in the U.S. (*Mexican Outsiders* 169).

Latinos have made a number of gains in the social and political arenas in the last decades, however. The Chicano and Puerto Rican movements fought for and experienced many successes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as spawning a renaissance of community-oriented arts activity in the areas of literature, art, theater and film.<sup>5</sup> The fruits of their media advocacy efforts in the

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<sup>4</sup> The proportion of Latinos living in poverty rose from 21.5 percent in 1972 to 29.6 percent in 1982 (Bogue qtd. in Acuña *Occupied* note 121, 409). This percentage dropped slightly to 28.1 percent in 1991. (Gonzalez 236). While the median family income in 1990 was \$35,975, it was \$23,446 for Latino families, according to Ilan Stavans, citing the 1990 U.S. Census. This entrenched poverty was due in part to inflation and recession in the 1970s and early 1980s, while unemployment was on the rise. Job opportunities for Latinos also were obstructed by a shift from blue-collar to high-tech industry.

<sup>5</sup> The late journalist Rubén Salazar described a Chicano as “a Mexican American with a non-Anglo image of himself” (*Los Angeles Times*, 6 Feb 1970).

film and television industries are now evident in the form of a small but established cadre of Latino filmmakers and media professionals, as I discuss later in this chapter.

As Noriega documents in *Shot in America*, many of the first Chicano films were produced by activist filmmakers active in the Mexican American civil rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Citizen-oriented federal regulation of the television industry and the government's examination of inequities in the media industries, which documented the lack of employment of Latino or other minorities, also spurred the establishment in this period of Latino-oriented public affairs shows and bilingual children's programming, as well as minority hiring policies and trainee programs at many television stations and film studios.<sup>7</sup>

These changes, although often only short-term, gave a handful of Latino and Latina filmmakers a training ground and entrance into the industry that had not previously existed. Aida Barrera, who produced the bilingual children's television program *Carrascolendas* in 1970, for example, points out that among the Latinos who got their first or some of their first broadcast production experience on the program, were "documentary filmmaker Hector Galán, writer-producer Nancy De Los Santos, writer-director Nely Galán, actor Luís Avalos, documentary producer Graciela Rogelio, actor Mike Gomez, actor Pete Leal, actress Diana Elizondo, [and] writer Luis Santeiro" (Avila). Several of the Latino

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<sup>6</sup> As such these films often were both inspired by and meant to support one or more of the causes of the movement, as well as to more generally raise awareness of Mexican American history and/or pride in Mexican American ethnic identity. A number of these seminal films, such as Jesus Salvador Treviño's *Yo Soy Chicano* (1972) and Susan Racho's *Garment Workers* (1975), appeared on the first Latino-oriented public affairs television program, often also produced by Latino rookies in the television industry. These public affairs programs in turn were in existence in part because of the dogged efforts of Latino advocacy groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s to protest against and negotiate with the entertainment industries over the participation and representation of Latinos in the media. For a more complete history, see Noriega's *Shot in America*.

<sup>7</sup> Noriega details in *Shot in America* that 72 television and film production companies in fact agreed to employment plans negotiated by the Department of Justice in 1970 that called for increased minority hiring.

activist filmmakers who produced their first films at this time, a small contingent which included Moctesuma Esparza, Gregory Nava, Luis Valdez, Jesus Salvador Treviño, and Susan Racho, also went on to produce, write, and/or direct feature films in the next decade that offered Latina and Latino actors substantial roles.

In addition, Latinos began to be seen both as an important voting bloc and perhaps even more importantly with respect to film representation, consumer market, in these decades. As some Latinos began to experience rising affluence and the Latino market was growing faster than that of the general population, advertisers began to recognize Latinos as a consumer force, as Dávila and America Rodríguez point out.<sup>8</sup> Advertisers and entertainment producers were and are increasingly aware of the growing and lucrative Latino market, which had a collective \$380 million buying power in 2000, a 66 percent increase since 1990 (Halter 140).

While the film industry appears to still need some convincing with respect to catering to Latino audiences, considering how few Latino or Latina stars have been promoted and Latino-oriented projects “greenlit” in the last decade, reaction to Latino buying power has entailed a blossoming of Latino-oriented advertising and media production in other arenas. These developments have included, among other shifts, expanding advertising budgets directed at the Hispanic population, an increase in the number and types of Spanish-speaking and Hispanic-oriented media outlets, and—because of the comparative youth of the Hispanic population—fuel for the already established trend of targeting young consumers (Halter 140).

This progress has not come without a price, however. In what appears to be a backlash to the progress made in the last decades, Latinos also have often faced negative attitudes in the public consciousness in this time period. While



overt discrimination has faded (Gonzalez 195), ethnic minorities and the poor often appeared and appear to be blamed for the nation's financial woes. Mexican Americans and other Latino Americans, in discourses that echo those of the 1930s, again have been treated as "bandits, blamed for stealing jobs" at various junctures since the 1970s (Acuña *Occupied* 403).

Both a reflection and catalyst in such scapegoating, the news media and politicians also have focused heavily on reinforcing and policing the U.S.-Mexico border over the last few decades. The border in fact has remained a heated political issue on both the federal and state levels in the case of California, Texas, and other border states. For instance, during the 1996 presidential campaign, "[t]he House considered and passed new immigration legislation, further restricting illegal immigration and adding 5,000 new border patrol agents" (Margaret Montoya 642).

Not only has Latino immigration been constructed as a national problem, but the American imagination is also increasingly policed with respect to Latin influence. Such "culture wars" arguably heated up considerably in the early 1990s, when a backlash against multicultural approaches to education and increasing diversity in popular culture was felt in the U.S. Representatives of the Right and conservative scholars argued in such debates that American culture was under siege by non-whites and urged a return to "traditional" educational approaches and cultural forms, as scholars such as Elizabeth Martinez point out. The emphasis on a "Latin explosion" in entertainment also often rings of such alarmist ethnocentric thought. Thus the boundaries that are policed with respect to increasing Latinidad in this country are cultural as well as physical, as was discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to the crossover stardom phenomenon.

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<sup>8</sup> The number of middle-class Latino families (with incomes of at least \$50,000) grew from 7% to 11% between 1972 and 1988, a percentage still far below the figures for Anglo American families, of which 23% were middle class in 1988, according to de Castillo and DeLeon (152).

With respect to these developments of the last decades, Los Angeles has often served as a microcosm of national change and consciousness. In 1998, the Latino community in Los Angeles was the largest in the U.S., totaling approximately 3 million and comprising 45% of the population (Valle and Torres 4).<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, in the last decade, anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment in the state of California has resulted in legislation that has denied tax-funded services, including public school education, to undocumented immigrants, as well as doing away with affirmative action measures and enforcing English-only classrooms. A system of social apartness is particularly evident in Los Angeles when considering the film and related entertainment industries in the greater metropolitan area. Despite the numbers of Latinos in Los Angeles, they generally comprise no more than two percent of professionals in any of the creative or executive branches of the industry.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, most film and television executives do not live within the Los Angeles city limits, but instead live in the suburbs to the west or north of the city, fully removed from the majority of the city's Latino residents. As Los Angeles historians such as Mike Davis and David Rieff have remarked, what wealthy Angelenos do know of Latinos generally comes from their limited experience with their gardener or their maid. Rieff documents this increasingly "Third World" take on Latino Americans in the city, which contributes to a segregated landscape in which Latinos serve as second-class citizens and Latino and Latina

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<sup>9</sup> Notably, the proportion of Mexican Americans has decreased, within the county of Los Angeles from 80% to 75% in 1990, due to an influx of Latino immigrants from Central America, mainly from El Salvador and Guatemala. As more Anglo residents have moved outside the city limits, Latino children have gone from comprising 20% of students in the Los Angeles public schools in 1970 to being a majority by 1980. The schools meanwhile have become increasingly under-funded and poorly maintained.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) reported in 2001 that 1.35% of their membership self-identified as Latino, up from .58% in 1990. The Directors Guild of America (DGA) in turn reported that only 1.1% of total days worked in 1999 were worked by Latino directors. This was a drop from 1.9% in 1998. African American directors, in contrast, worked 4.6% of work days in 1999, up from 2.5% in 1990 (qtd. in Aguila and Meyer 33).

stardom seems, despite the good intentions of some, at cross-purposes with the way life is conducted by the wealthy.

## **OPPORTUNITY AND OBSTRUCTIONS IN THE NEW HOLLYWOOD**

The last few decades have seen major shifts in the film and related entertainment industries as well, alongside the reiteration of old paradigms that have historically obstructed the careers of Latino actors. In this section I survey the developments that have had an impact on the continuing obstructions and new opportunities that Latino actors and would-be stars have encountered in Hollywood since the 1970s. These New Hollywood industrial developments include an emphasis on casting only “name” actors in studio-backed films, the increasing power of talent management, and the rise of ethnic-oriented television and independent film production in the eighties, including the inception of Latino-oriented commercial filmmaking. In this industry of relationships, Latino filmmakers still have a long way to go with respect to becoming part of the decision-making echelon in Hollywood, however, as I discuss in this chapter.

In the 1970s, socially challenging films, some which focused on issues of racial discrimination, briefly made their mark. Such films of “great expectations and lost illusions” were soon overshadowed by the financial success of such mega-hits as *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), however (Cook 6). The tremendous profits of these blockbusters, combined with the skyrocketing costs of film production, prompted the rise of a new mentality, a demand not just for profitable films, but for films that would turn profits in the hundreds of millions.<sup>11</sup> In this New Hollywood, studios made even fewer and “bigger” films than in previous decades. Such box-office insurance as “pre-sold properties” and stars with proven track records became *de rigueur*, as scholars such as Schatz, Justin

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<sup>11</sup> By 1989, the average cost of producing and marketing a film had grown to \$32 million. This figure continued to climb, reaching \$76 million in 1998 (Klady 11).

Wyatt and Jon Lewis have documented, which did not bode well for actors, and particularly non-white actors, attempting to break in to the industry.

Moviemaking as a business and moviemaking as an art became further enmeshed in the 1980s, as film studios became components of mega-conglomerates that also owned television stations, record labels, publishing houses, toy companies, and theme parks. As the cost of the production and marketing of films continued to rise, raising the stakes with respect to the profits necessary for a studio's survival, ancillary exhibition and marketing ventures such as home video, cable television, and merchandising tie-ins also became increasingly important.<sup>12</sup> In this evolving media environment of the "new" New Hollywood, stardom came to drive not only films but also multi-media franchises, with stars serving as vitally important "brand names" or "product endorsements" of these franchises.

The rising power of talent management in these decades also has contributed to keeping most Latino and Latina actors at a significant disadvantage. Talent agencies such as William Morris, Creative Artists Associates (CAA), and International Creative Management (ICM) increasingly came close to eclipsing the power of the studios as they controlled the screening and packaging of talent and the development of film projects in the 1970s and '80s.<sup>13</sup> The agencies would eventually have a powerful "cartelization of the industry" by the 1980s (Prince 161). The screening and promotion of talent thus fell almost completely to talent and management agencies; within this rubric a well-connected agent or manager became the necessary ingredient to a rising star's career. The need for connections within this still overwhelmingly white inner circle of the entertainment industry was vital for success, and Latinos and

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<sup>12</sup> Non-theatrical film viewing now makes up 85% of a studio's film revenues, while the film-related merchandise market has become a \$100 billion industry (Sandler 36).

other non-whites were and are at a decided disadvantage in this respect, a structuring dynamic which Reba L. Chaisson refers to as the “cultural polarization” of the industry (37). As journalist Christopher Goodwin quotes black director Reginald Hudlin: “Hollywood’s power circle has levels of segregation that would not be accepted in IBM or American Express” (*The Independent* July 8, 1998).

Simultaneous developments within the industry in the 1980s did create openings for Latino-oriented filmmaking, however, and by extension for Latino and Latina stardom. Alongside blockbuster production trends, production companies and distribution networks that targeted niche audiences with relatively low-budget specialty films were established,<sup>14</sup> with Latino characters and stories beginning to be included in this growing realm of specialty film production. The success of many of these films launched careers, particularly for female and minority filmmakers. Thompson and Bordwell point to the success of very low budget films such as Wayne Wang’s *Chan is Missing* (1982) and Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) in particular as easing the way for “larger budgets and wider audiences” for specialty films (712). Ethnic-oriented films in fact were some of the most successful of these films, as they had “a clearly defined niche market,” alerting studio executives to possibilities of profits that potentially could be made from non-white and other niche audiences (Kleinhans 323).

A number of Latino-oriented films were produced as a part of these developments, following the birth of Latino filmmaking in relation to the rise of Latino civil rights activism in the late 1960s and 1970s, as previously

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<sup>13</sup> “By the late 1970s, more films were initiated in agents’ offices than at the studios” (Cook 345). Many powerful agents also went on to run studios themselves. “By 1977 six of the seven majors were run by former agents, five of them graduates of CMA,” as Cook points out (344).

<sup>14</sup> “Indie” film flourished in the 1980s. The proportion of independently produced films to total film output “increased from 58 percent to 69 percent” between 1984 and 1988 in particular, with this number dropping again to 60 percent in 1990 (Rosen 243).

discussed.<sup>15</sup> Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983) and Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* (1981) were among the first Latino-oriented features produced in this time period that found a sizeable commercial audience. They were joined by such films as Moctesuma Esparza's *The Ballad Of Gregorio Cortez* (1983), Cheech Marin's *Born in East L.A.* (1987), Valdez's *La Bamba* (1987), and Raymond Menendez's *Stand and Deliver* (1988), in a flowering of Latino-written and directed films that were critically well-received and also turned small profits in the 1980s, paving the way for future productions and providing openings for Latino stardom.

The small-scale successes of these projects brought about a rethinking in the industry of the Latino/Spanish-speaking audience (Valle 262). The success of *La Bamba*, about the life of Mexican American rock star Richie Valens, in particular made an impact because of Columbia's successful, simultaneous release of the film in a first-ever Spanish-dubbed version, resulting in record profits.<sup>16</sup> Seeing the potential dollar signs, film executives increasingly began to see the Latino market as an untapped source of profits which "could be enticed with material that resonated with them personally" (Rosen 246).

Additionally, the industry's discovery of the potential appeal of non-white actors and stories to white audiences came about in part due to shifts in television programming. The success of ethnic-oriented television programs in the 1980s and early 1990s, in particular such series as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-1996), ultimately helped to establish the potential profitability of programming that not only would appeal to non-white audiences, but also cross over in appeal to white audiences.

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<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to choose one identifying label for these films, which have alternately been called Chicano cinema, Latino-oriented, or Latino-produced. They were unique in their focus, however, as stories populated with Latino lead characters, and particular focus on Latino audiences.

<sup>16</sup> *La Bamba* set a number of precedents with respect to its marketing and success. The film earned a solid \$54.2 million at the box office and over \$24 million from videotape rentals (Internet Movie Database).

As Gray documents, the earliest of these shows were developed and tried out because the Big Three networks had experienced a decline in white viewership in the mid-eighties. As a result, they were “forced to define their audiences even more precisely in terms of demographic characteristics,” prompting the first “narrowcasting” of prime-time television (Gray 58). The Fox network, founded in 1986, in fact established itself through becoming versed in ethnic-specific media viewing trends and developing programming that catered primarily to black and Latino audiences, as Kristal Brent Zook has documented. As Zook states:

In the 1980s middle-class white audiences began to replace standard network viewing with cable subscriptions and videocassette recorders. Since working-class African American and Latino audiences in general did not yet have access to these new technologies, they continued to rely on the “free” networks... good pitches, or show ideas presented to producers, began to be defined as those appealing to both “urban” and “mainstream” audiences (3).

Following this strategy, by 1993, Fox’s prime-time lineup consisted of “the largest single crop of black-produced shows in television history” (Zook 4). The Fox network in this manner was able to successfully court a young, urban audience and thus to establish itself as a major network.<sup>17</sup>

The success of such television series as *The Cosby Show* and of Fox in the 1990s played a role in encouraging executives to also give Latino-themed films and TV series a try and to promote promising Latin performers, albeit in a more tentative fashion than was the case for African American television shows, films, and performers. In addition, another caveat must be made. Comparisons have borne out that studios and production companies did not spend as much on these

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<sup>17</sup> Fox later abandoned much of its black-produced programming for more traditional (read: white) television fare. The network’s programming strategy has since been reiterated by two newer networks, the WB and UPN, in their first years of programming.

shows or films or on their marketing as on their “white” counterparts, even while they looked for equal or greater returns to prove the worthiness of these investments. Guerrero attests to this imbalance in describing the \$20 million budget typically allotted for African American-cast films in 1997 as opposed to the \$30 million that films with primarily white casts received on average (“Circus” 344). Latino-oriented and produced films have received even smaller budgets in the last few decades. *Stand and Deliver*, for example, was made for only \$1.37 million.<sup>18</sup>

Even given this imbalance, studios still generally want high returns on such investments. Film companies often used profit-to-cost ratios of 5-to-1 to determine the success of African American films (and arguably, Latino films) in the 1980s and ‘90s, as opposed to the 3-to-1 ratio typical in the industry (Guerrero “Circus” 344). These industrial standards and practices perpetuate a skew in which non-white products (and by extension, stars) compete on an uneven playing field with their higher budgeted and more heavily promoted “white” counterparts. Non-white stardom is discouraged in another manner when projects without white leads are given budgets that preclude paying actors at “star salary” rates.

Moreover, the growth of film production outside the major studios hasn’t necessarily freed actors from the obstacles to being cast associated with studio-produced films, particularly as filmmakers, regardless of how independent they may wish to be, still must work within the Hollywood system if they want mainstream distribution of their films. As Chaisson documents, a “desire for the familiar” with respect to the favoring of “name” actors has continued to dominate the financing and distribution even of independent films (38). The obvious Catch-22 for an unknown actor: She can’t establish a name for herself when she can’t be cast, a conundrum which unknown Latinas and Latinos will always face.

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<sup>18</sup> The film eventually grossed a phenomenal \$14 million in domestic box office, however (Rosen with Hamilton, 199, 202).



As the most successful Latino filmmakers work with bigger film budgets and encounter more studio control of their projects, pressure also has been put on them as well to not cast Latino actors, particularly unknown actors, in their film's key roles, as scholars such as Noriega document. Gregory Nava, for example, had difficulty raising funding for *My Family/Mi Familia* because he planned to cast unknown Latino actors and actresses, a group which included Jennifer Lopez, in some of the lead roles. As Elizabeth Martinez quotes Nava in a 1994 interview: "This was one of the reasons we had trouble raising money... It's tough to do that, but I stuck to my guns" (53). Robert Rodriguez also has had to deal strategically with his studio when choosing to cast Latino actors, such as was the case when he chose to cast Salma Hayek in the film *Desperado* (1995), often by successfully working within small budgets (deLeon 22).

These dynamics are exacerbated by the fact that Latino filmmakers for the most part have not entered the higher echelons of power relationships in the industry, a crucial step toward long-term progress in a business that often is built primarily on relationships.<sup>19</sup> African American filmmakers have made greater strides and have gained more allies in the industry than Latinos in this respect. Guerrero remarked in 1998 that about twenty African American-oriented films are released each year ("Circus" 328), while this is a level of production that Latinos can only aspire to at this time. In addition, despite a growing cadre of Latino filmmakers and producers in Hollywood, Latino and Latina actors still often face obstacles in the last decades that are long-time holdovers from previous eras, as I explore in the following section.

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<sup>19</sup> Chaisson, in a study of the climate within the industry toward filmmakers of color, determined that black and Latino filmmakers still face a number of obstacles in the specialty film industry, as evidenced in the lack of attendance by industry professionals at ethnic-oriented film festivals and filmmakers' converse lack of access to industry resources.

## **LATINOS IN ‘70S AND ‘80S HOLLYWOOD: FROM DROUGHT TO THE “DECADE OF THE HISPANIC”**

Social developments in the country began to be felt within the Hollywood star system in the 1970s, but only within the strictures of old paradigms. The casting of Latino actors in lead roles was rare, as I document below. The 1980s brought new opportunities, however, especially as ethnic-oriented niche marketing began to influence the development of some film and television programming and a rise in independent filmmaking led to the release of the first commercially successful Latino-oriented films.

Young, “intelligent” (and white) stars such as Robert Redford were popular with moviegoers in the 1970s, while white actors who played action heroes held sway, with Paul Newman, John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Robert Redford, Burt Reynolds, and Sylvester Stallone dominating the rankings of the most bankable stars of the decade (Cook *Lost* 339, citing *Variety* and *Motion Picture Almanac*’s annual rankings). Only a few women—Barbra Streisand, Ali McGraw, Goldie Hawn, Jane Fonda, and Diane Keaton—and no Latinos were among the top ten box-office draws of decade (Cook *Lost* 339).

As Rita Moreno had found in earlier decades, Latinas were cast mainly in minor roles in only a few genres in the seventies, among them the Western, the urban social problem film, and the urban gangster film. Such films often posed Latino characters as prone to violence and crime. Notably, advocacy efforts on the part of Latino groups for more positive representations actually had a chilling effect on Latino casting in this decade. According to Cortés and others, while Latino media advocacy led to the retirement of a number of controversial Hispanic images in advertising and television, such as Frito-Lay’s Frito Bandito character, the Chiquita Banana, and actor Bill Dana’s Jose Jimenez impersonation, little emerged to take their place. To avoid controversy, “along with the reduction in Chicana stereotyping, came a reduction of Chicana typing of

any kind” (Cortés 134). The main opportunities that rose in this period were for Latino actors, Keller asserts, “who did not look overly ethnic” and thus were cast in non-Latino roles, a pattern which continues today (178).<sup>20</sup>

The 1980s brought new opportunities, however. As Noriega states, “Chicano representation appeared to undergo a dramatic change, at least in terms of the relative increase in roles and recognition for Latino actors” (*Chicanos* xvii). As previously mentioned, the rise of Latino-produced feature films in this period gave a number of Latino actors their first film roles. Their casts included both established actors such as Edward James Olmos, Cheech Marin, and Andy Garcia, and relative newcomers such as Esai Morales, Rosana Desoto, and Lupe Ontiveros.

Interestingly, the handful of Latino-oriented film successes were treated dramatically in the mainstream press, which declared the 1980s the “Decade of the Hispanic” in much the same manner as the “Latin Explosion” was declared in 1998. For example, on August 18, 1987, *Newsweek* trumpeted a “new Latin beat on celluloid” (66). Bruce Corwin, the owner of the largest Spanish-language theater chain in the U.S., was quoted describing *La Bamba* as “the breakthrough for American film into the Hispanic market” (qtd. in Foote 66). The article also raised what chroniclers of Latino American culture already knew, the understanding that “Hispanic actors can be stars” (Foote 67).

As the term “crossover” began to be used to describe Latino-oriented films successful in drawing in non-Latino audiences, it also was used to label the new Latino stars that appeared in them. An ambiguous strain ran through much of the media’s description of Latino and Latina actors in this period of coverage. *Time* reported much the same “news” on the Latin Wave a year after *Newsweek*, stating:

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<sup>20</sup> Actors and actresses whose phenotypal appearance lent them an ambiguous ethnicity in their initial star construction and who achieved some success in the 1970s and 1980s included Martin

More and more, American film, theater, music, design, dance and art are taking on a Hispanic color and spirit. Look around. You can see the special lighting, the distinctive gravity, the portable wit, the personal spin. The new marquee names have a Spanish ring: Edward James Olmos, Andy Garcia, Maria Conchita Alonso... (Lacayo 46).

Kathleen Newman aptly describes the problematic and ultimately limiting aspects of the broader media construction of the Decade of the Hispanic, asserting that in such discourse “*Time* magazine believed it permissible to state that (a) Latino culture is not U.S. culture, (b) it is new, and (c) it principally involves entertainment and aesthetics but not the political-economic structures of the nation” (69). Ultimately, the need for reassurance that Latinos and Latin culture still existed primarily in the margins of U.S. society and were not the “multicultural Trojan horse” that was feared appears to have motivated the media discourse in this time period (Newman 69), a formulation applies equally well to the most recent trumpeting of a new Latin Wave.

Nevertheless, as a result of the growing awareness of the Latino market, a number of film projects began to be developed by studios and production companies with Latino themes and cast members in the 1980s. Keller has (perhaps overly) optimistically stated that awareness of the “population power and consequently political, economic, and cultural importance [of Latinos] spurred all sorts of film, television, and video initiatives for and by U.S. Hispanics” in the 1980s (151). Articles in industry trade journals and such magazines as *Hispanic* also made note of the fact that every studio and network had at least one Latino-themed project in development. Opportunities in turn appeared to be on the rise for Latino actors and actresses.

What these reports didn’t account for in their optimism, however, was the minute number of Latino-oriented film and television projects that actually would make the leap from development to production. While such projects—and by

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Sheen, Raul Julia, and Andy Garcia.

extension, the Latino actors and actresses that starred in them—arguably were viewed more positively with respect to potential appeal than had been the case in Rita Moreno’s early years of the 1950s, Latino projects and actors still were considered poor financial risks. Even in the case of lower-budget projects, specialty divisions of major studios consider selling potential to ‘the yuppie baby boom audience’” when deciding whether or not to greenlight, finance, or distribute a film, as one Fox Searchlight executive related (qtd. in Chaisson 37).

Ironically, the Decade of the Hispanic only lasted a few years. Despite this buzz in the late 1980s, Latinos apparently were out of style again in the early 1990s. Filmmakers and actors faced the same lack of interest in Latino-oriented film projects that had been the norm a decade prior (Avila, June 1997).<sup>21</sup> Charles Ramírez Berg has remarked on this cycling of public interest in Latin culture in the U.S. as having occurred multiple times in Hollywood film history (qtd. in Avila); the rage for Latin Lovers in the late 1920s discussed in Chapter 2 serves as a vivid case in point. By the mid-1990s, however, the pendulum was swinging back again and Latino-oriented media projects were once again slowly on the rise.

### **EARLY LATINO CROSSOVER IN THE 1980S AND '90S**

These industry developments and shifts in audience viewing patterns prompted a somewhat more ethnically diverse Hollywood star system in the 1980s and ‘90s, as I describe below. For example, a handful of successful Latino stars began to enter the American imaginary. The first Latino “crossover” stars were trumpeted in relation to Latino-oriented films of the 1980s such as *La Bamba* and *Stand and Deliver* (although ironically, the young, break-out star of both, Lou Diamond Phillips, was primarily of Philippino descent rather than Latino). Developments that aided in the construction of Latino stars in this period

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<sup>21</sup> A similar plateau was felt by black filmmakers after an “auspicious takeoff in the mid-80s,” according to Guerrero (“Circus” 328).

included not just the birth of Latino commercial feature film production, but also the rise of Latino-oriented print and broadcast news media and the entrance of talent management personnel that specialized in marketing Latino and other non-white actors to the mainstream public.

The 1980s and '90s witnessed the shifting of Hollywood casting and promotional paradigms with respect to race and ethnicity to allow for a handful of African American and Latino film stars. White stars have continued to dominate and to be paid substantially more for their work, however.<sup>22</sup> In larger-budget productions, African American actors Eddie Murphy and Whoopie Goldberg were able to break through the color barrier as top box office draws in the eighties, the only actors of color to do so in this decade. Goldberg also was one of very few women to achieve this level of bankability (Prince 174). In the 1990s, a few black actors, including Denzel Washington and Halle Barry, and a handful of Latinos, perhaps only Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, Jimmy Smitts and Benjamin Bratt, were among the stars perceived as potential box office draws (although not among the top ten), as my interviews in the industry confirmed.

These scarce few Latino “names” around whom film projects could be developed comprised a boom in comparison to prior decades, however. Producer Moctesuma Esparza (*The Milagro Beanfield War* [1988], *Mi Familia* [1995], and *Selena* [1997]) has asserted that it became easier to sell projects starring Latino actors and actresses particularly in the late 1990s, as films such as *Selena* convinced executives of the money to be made on the Latino market and more Latino actors were considered bankable (Cantú S24, Avila). Jennifer Lopez in particular thus both led and benefited from this trend.

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<sup>22</sup> The salaries of the top stars in the industry in fact skyrocketed in the 1980s. Sylvester Stallone, the highest paid star of the decade, purportedly kicking off this trend when he was paid \$16 million per picture in 1987 (Prince 174). The handful of top stars today now are paid in upwards of \$20 million. Latino actors traditionally have earned far smaller paychecks. Jennifer Lopez's recent \$12 million salary for an upcoming film is substantially higher than that of the typical Latino in Hollywood.

This broadening of the Hollywood star system and growing openness toward Latino stardom can be attributed as well to the rise in Latino-oriented media that has promoted and in fact created celebrities in the last few decades. Since the late 1980s, a distinctly Latino-oriented national news media has been in existence; reports on Latino celebrities and Latino-oriented entertainment projects have figured heavily in their content.<sup>23</sup>

In many ways, the mainstream media coverage of the late Tejano singer Selena's death in 1995 paved the way for the development of many of these media outlets and a greater emphasis on Latino-oriented celebrity news in general. Arguably the first Mexican American woman to achieve widespread fame in American popular culture—though with her death rather than her considerable achievements during her life—Selena Quintanilla Perez, known as “Selena” to her fans, became known to the mass public after her slaying at the hands of a former employee.

Shortly after her death, *People Weekly* put Selena on their cover in the Southwest.<sup>24</sup> The run of 450,000 copies promptly sold out, as did a subsequent tribute issue of 600,000 copies. The quick success of these editions served as strong testimony of the size and profitability of the Latino audience, prompting the magazine to launch *People en Español*, which since has seen competition from English-language (*Latin Style*, *Latin Girl*, *Moderna*), bilingual (*Latina*, *Estylo*), and Spanish-language magazines such as *Cristina*, all of which devote at least a portion of their news content to Latino actors and other celebrities. Meanwhile, old stalwarts such as *Hispanic* focus sporadically on Latino stars and media producers. Latino stars are subsequently often created through heavy promotion in this Latino-focused market arena, which then is noticed by the

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<sup>23</sup> See Subervi-Vélez, “Mass Communication and Hispanics,” for a thorough history of the rise of these media outlets.

<sup>24</sup> In the rest of the country a photo of the cast of *Friends* was used on the cover, on the assumption that Selena would be of interest to readers only in the Southwest.

mainstream press. As I will discuss further in the chapter, this dynamic has greatly assisted in the launch of the careers of a number of contemporary Latino film stars, including Jennifer Lopez.<sup>25</sup>

The increased record sales of and media attention given to Tejano music after Selena's death also gave momentum to the marketing of other Latin music, Latino performers, and Latino-themed film projects in the late-1990s, particularly as music and film increasingly were viewed as synergistic marketing tools for one other. The success of Ricky Martin's self-titled English-language album in the summer of 1999 was a watershed moment in this respect. The simultaneous success of Martin, Lopez, Cristina Aguilera, and other Latino performers in fact prompted the "Latin Wave" coverage of 1998 and 1999 discussed in Chapter 1. In this new crossover marketing formulation, the most potentially lucrative Latino and Latina performers were those that could be considered double and triple threats in the synergistic realms of popular music and other entertainment arenas.

Of course, this is not so different from earlier eras, when the ability to dance and/or sing has often provided Latino and Latina performers' first break in Hollywood, as was discussed in relation to Dolores Del Rio and Rita Moreno's careers. What is different is how the need to span multiple media worlds and thus "cross-pollinate" in the marketing of film projects has become universal within the star system as a whole (Kitt qtd. in Tan F5). As Zorianna Kitt, journalist on the film industry beat for *The Hollywood Reporter*, asserted in 2001, "Today's entertainment industry is exactly that, it's entertainment. ... Things aren't as segregated into pockets anymore. It's not enough to be an actor or singer or writer. People have to be entertainers across the board in today's world" (qtd. in Tan F5).

Latino actors and actresses also have benefited in the last decade from

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<sup>25</sup> This phenomenon was confirmed in personal interviews with Bel Hernandez and Sandy Varga, the editor and advertising manager of *Latin Heat* magazine, in 2000.



working with talent managers and producers who are part of a new breed in the industry with respect to specializing in the career management and promotion of non-white performers. This new breed of “cultural brokers” includes such professionals as manager-producer Eric Gold, producers Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds and Tracy E. Edmonds, and Benny Medina, Jennifer Lopez’s current personal manager. These agents, managers, producers, and publicists are respected players in the industry and are often African American or Latino themselves. Professionals such as Medina, who formerly was a music producer and has managed the careers of such performers as Will Smith, Jada Pinkett Smith, and Vivica A. Fox, increasingly have experience and connections in multiple entertainment realms and a sense of how to effectively and synergistically market non-white stars to both white audiences and audiences of color.

Another such example is Arenas Group, helmed by Santiago Pozo, which has been instrumental in helping studios take notice of the Spanish-speaking audience in the U.S. In his career in Hollywood, Pozo spearheaded the first Spanish-language-dubbed release of an animated film, Disney’s *An American Tail* (1986) in U.S. theaters (personal interview, Pozo). Formerly emphasizing film promotion, Arenas Group has expanded to include the promotion of actors, with sixteen actors, including Jennifer Lopez, currently on its roster. Pozo told *Daily Variety* that the firm planned to expand by developing film projects as well as marketing them. Pozo explained that building a solid Latino fan base would be key for up-and-coming stars, as was the case for Lopez with *My Family/Mi Familia* and *Selena*, before attempting a crossover to a broader U.S. audience (Phillips 6).

Another element that has provided opportunities to some Latino and Latina actors in Hollywood is the recent trend in film production with an eye to the so-called “urban youth” market, which is both culturally diverse (including

white youth) and open to culturally diverse performers. Examples can be found in recent, multicultural ensemble films such as *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) and *Romeo Must Die* (2000). Latino actors marketed to this “hip,” multicultural youth audience include Michelle Rodriguez (*Girl Fight* [2000], *The Fast and the Furious*), and Rosario Dawson (*Kids* [1995], *Josie and the Pussycats* [2001]), as well as actors of partial Hispanic descent, such as Freddie Prinze, Jr. (of late 1990s teen film fame) and Jordana Brewster (*The Faculty* [1998], *The Fast and the Furious*). Opportunities for actors of Latino descent related to these new cultural and genre trends likely will continue to grow in the coming years.

In the following sections, I explore these industrial shifts in more detail as they relate to the career of Jennifer Lopez. To highlight transitions that have taken place in the development of Lopez’s star image, I focus on three approximate stages of her career and the respective constructed audience appeals in her publicity in these time periods, with the caveat that these stages are convenient approximations and necessarily overlap in some respects. These stages include: 1) Lopez’s early film and television career in the years of 1991-1997, when she was cast in television and film projects that often were African American and Latino-produced and targeted primarily to Latino and other non-white niche audiences; 2) Lopez’s “crossover years,” roughly 1998-1999, during which she began appearing in A-list Hollywood films and was introduced to white audiences in related film publicity; and 3) what I term the “synergy years,” 1999-Present, during which Lopez has been launched as a singer and music video artist alongside her burgeoning film career and has become in the process an increasingly multi-media and profit-driving celebrity.

## THE 1990S: JENNIFER LOPEZ WORKS HER WAY UP

The career trajectory and star promotion of Jennifer Lopez throughout the last decade serves as rich illustration of how social and industrial developments have distinctly colored Latina stardom since the 1990s. I explore below how Lopez made her way into and attracted attention in the industry, similarly to both Dolores Del Rio and Rita Moreno, as a dancer. In contrast with Del Rio and Moreno's early vehicles, however, Lopez's early productions were films and television program specifically targeting African American, Latino, and "urban" audiences.

According to interviews, Jennifer Lopez had a middle-class upbringing in the Castle Hill neighborhood of the Bronx. She was born on July 24, 1970, to Puerto Rican parents, Guadalupe, a kindergarten teacher, and David, a computer technician.<sup>26</sup> Lopez was the middle of three daughters. Similar to the performer who Lopez credits with being one of her primary influences, Rita Moreno, Lopez aspired to a career in dance and theater from an early age. She has described the film *West Side Story* in particular as influential.<sup>27</sup> Not wanting to sell herself short, however, Lopez has reported she aspired to be Maria, not Anita:

I loved that it was a musical and about Puerto Ricans and that they were living where *I* lived. I wanted to be Anita because I love to dance and she was Bernardo's girlfriend and he was so hot. (*pauses*) But then Maria was the *star* of the movie. So it was basically like, I gotta be Maria (qtd. in Bardin 144).

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<sup>26</sup> Lopez's mother's parents were in fact European, but settled in Puerto Rico. Some accounts dispute Lopez's class background, to the extent that it is difficult to definitively determine. It appears that a working-class background was emphasized in Lopez's early career in order to shore up her authenticity as a Latina actress, a marked contrast to the shoring up of Dolores Del Rio's high-class background that took place in the late 1920s.

<sup>27</sup> Several news accounts in fact have indicated that Lopez would like to produce and star in a remake of the film, including one which indicated that she had approached Ricky Martin regarding the possibility.

Lopez began taking dance lessons at the age of 5, eventually taking classes daily in Manhattan after her school day at a private Catholic school in the Bronx. In a parallel with Moreno and Del Rio's roots in Latin dance, one of Lopez's dance schools included the Ballet Hispanico, where students learn such dances as the flamenco, salsa and mambo, along with ballet, according to a founder of the school (Dominguez 84).

Lopez acted in her first film role at the age of 16, in a small part in a film that was not widely released, *My Little Girl* (1986). After her high school graduation in 1987, what followed were lean years of doing musical theater in New York. Lopez later joined the dance ensemble of "Golden Musicals of Broadway," which toured Europe, and a tour of "Synchronicity" in Japan.

The rise of African American-oriented entertainment forms, in the form of the newly established Fox network, played a role in Lopez's entrance into the industry. Lopez got her first big break in 1991, when she beat out over 2,000 hopefuls to become one of the Fly Girls, the house dancers on Fox TV's irreverent Afrocentric sketch comedy series *In Living Color* (1990-94). As one of the featured dancers, Lopez worked with the show's choreographer Rosie Perez and gained important television exposure. As photographs of Lopez with the Fly Girls reveal, Lopez dressed very much the ethnic home girl as a dancer in the ensemble, sporting a dark red mouth, big earrings, and attitude.

In addition to her work as a Fly Girl, Lopez also appeared as a dancer in music videos, such as Janet Jackson's 1992 "That's the Way Love Goes" in these years. Lopez's first opportunities in the industry in this manner can be viewed as a 1990s version of the Latina-as-entertainer paradigm. As was the case for Moreno, the challenge then becomes proving oneself as *more* than just an entertaining body, a construction with which Lopez has also had to contend.

Jennifer Lopez apparently impressed her co-stars and the television audience with her dance moves and appearance on *In Living Color*. This

translated to the creation of a public image meant to appeal to African American, Latino, and “urban” audiences; winning this audience was instrumental in establishing Lopez as a rising star. Lopez’s Fly Girl days also effectively illustrate the conundrum of authenticity in the construction of non-white stardom in the U.S. Zook describes authenticity as “the myth that one’s cultural heritage can be simplistically determined by fashion, income, or lifestyle” (18-19). In the realm of contemporary stardom it also is often attributed to body type, phenotypical characteristics, and fashion. Lopez’s curvy, bottom-heavy body and “street” fashion worn as a Fly Girl at this time arguably established her status as an authentic Latina and “down” person of color in this stage of her career.

It was through connections made on this show that Lopez subsequently secured a recurring role in the 1994 television series *South Central*, a hard-hitting dramedy about a working-class African American mother and her three children in the inner city of Los Angeles which was broadcast on Fox. In the series Lopez played Lucille, a brash Latina cashier at an African American grocery co-op, where the mother, Joan, eventually ended up working as the assistant manager.

Throughout the series Lucille challenges the marginalization of Latinos in this environment, ultimately prompting Joan and the co-op’s manager to broaden their notion of the community. Zook argues that through the construction of such characters as Lucille and Gloria on *The Sinbad Show* (1993-94), played by Mexican actress Salma Hayek, openings were made for Latinos in the African-American centered world that was created by the Fox series’ producers. Thus in this process an “urban” audience consisting of African Americans, Latinos, and young, culturally curious whites was constructed. Lopez, by extension, benefited from gaining the interest of this audience.

Although the show was quickly cancelled, it led to further television work for Lopez. The actress was given the chance to play a Mexican American young woman by the name of Melinda Lopez on two different series, the night-time

soaps *Second Chances* (1993-94) and *Hotel Malibu* (1994). The two CBS series were created by the same producing team, who included the characters played by Lopez and Pepe Serna in *Hotel Malibu* when *Second Chances* was cancelled.

While these series were both flashes in the pan, they allowed Lopez to gain experience and exposure. Lopez also had acquired Eric Gold of Gold-Miller Company as a personal manager. Gold had produced *In Living Color* and also managed the careers of the four Wayans brothers and Jim Carrey at the time, as well as director Gregory Nava ("Producer Eric Gold"), marking him in many respects as one of the new "cultural brokers" previously discussed. Together, these developments led to Lopez securing a number of small film roles. Lopez subsequently played a young, Depression-era Mexican immigrant in Gregory Nava's multi-generational Mexican American saga *My Family/Mi Familia* (1995), a Puerto Rican cop who catches the fancy of her co-workers, played by Wesley Snipes and Woody Harrelson, in *Money Train* (1995), a femme fatale of Apache descent in Oliver Stone's neo-noir *U-Turn* (1997), and a sweet Latina school teacher to Robin William's adult child in *Jack* (1996).

Although Lopez began to be recognized for her talent and beauty in these roles, she was not at this point considered a star player. As is standard when breaking in to the industry, Lopez was receiving a salary at the low end of the scale for these roles. For instance, she received \$350,000 for her role in *Money Train*, small change in the realm of mid-1990s Hollywood stardom (*Variety*, 15 May 1997).

The most notable of these roles was that of Maria Sanchez in *My Family/Mi Familia*, a young Mexican mother who survives hardships in the Depression-era U.S., including a forced deportation to and difficult journey back from Mexico. Lopez's talent and charisma quickly proved itself on the film set. Director Gregory Nava has described putting an iris around Lopez's face while shooting her in the first scene in which she appears in the film. "In that one shot,

everyone knew she was a movie star,” Nava has shared (qtd. in Turpin 5). Lopez also was nominated in the Best Supporting Actress category for her performance by the Independent Spirit Awards, which honors the best independently produced films and performances in these films each year.

The marketing strategy of Lopez’s publicity team at this early stage entailed emphasizing Lopez’s talent and authenticity. Gold/Miller put out a full-page ad in *Variety* to publicize her Independent Spirit award nomination (Feb. 23, 1996). For many industry professionals, unless they had seen the film, this ad may very well have been the first time they had seen Lopez in a close-up or read her name. The ad was dominated by a picture of Lopez as Maria Sanchez, in Depression-era Mexican hairstyle and dress. In an interview with reporter Alisa Valdes of the *Boston Globe*, Lopez’s “authentic” Latina ethnicity also was emphasized through a focus on her family in the Bronx. In describing them, Lopez stated, “We were a lot like the family in the movie. You know, all the passion and the things that immigrant Latino families go through” (reprinted in *The Press-Telegram*, D4.)

While *My Family/Mi Familia* offered Lopez a role of complexity, compelling emotion, and agency, all of which arguably contributed to the Independent Spirit nomination, in contrast she was treated as an accessory character in *Jack*, as a gutsy but otherwise one-dimensional love interest in her turn as a Latina cop in *Money Train*, and as a prototypical inviting ethnic body in Oliver Stone’s *U-Turn*. Both of these films offer moments in which Lopez serves mainly as the object of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” particularly *U-Turn*, in which the camera often fixates on the rear end and body of Lopez-as-femme fatale and shows the drifter played by Sean Penn doing the same.

At this stage in her career, it thus seemed Lopez was following the path that Rita Moreno had experienced in her first decades in Hollywood, with respect to portraying a number of “all-purpose ethnic” roles that showcased her body and

beauty above all else. She received positive attention in reviews for several of these roles, however, even while the films were not always praised. For example, reviewers of *Money Train* declared Lopez played the role of Grace with “sexy spirit” (Travers) and with “wit and grace” (*San Francisco Examiner* Nov. 22, 1995), even while they tended to pan the film. Moreover, the film grossed a respectable \$35.4 million. *Jack* additionally grossed \$58.6 million (Gardner 2E), and so was helpful for Lopez’s career even while it did little to showcase her acting skills. *U-Turn* offered more to Lopez in terms of providing a showy forum for her acting and physical assets. Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* described Lopez as “the archetypical noir femme fatale, sultry, scheming and impossible for men to resist” (*Los Angeles Times Online*). *Variety*, in turn, noticed only Lopez’s appearance, calling her simply “a looker in a tight red dress” in the role (McCarthy *Variety.com*).

Even at this early stage in her career, Lopez and her management team were planning for her to achieve greater stardom. Anticipating obstacles Latinas had encountered in Hollywood in the past and proactively working to undermine them was one aspect of her career strategy. In particular, Lopez wanted to avoid being typecast. According to Lopez, quoted in *Latina* in June 2001:

From the beginning I realized that as a Latin woman I was going to have certain obstacles to overcome that maybe other actresses wouldn’t. So I always made very specific choices not to get pigeonholed, not to ever let anybody say, “She can’t do that.” Even from the first two choices [referring to *My Family/Mi Familia* and *Money Train*], I made sure that people couldn’t say I did the same thing twice (Colón 84).

#### **PORTRAYING *SELENA*: LOPEZ AS MEXICAN AMERICAN LEGEND**

Jennifer Lopez’s performance in her next role, that of Mexican American icon Selena in Gregory Nava’s 1997 film of the same name undoubtedly was extremely important to her rise as a Hollywood star. The impact of playing such a charismatic and beloved Mexican American figure at this stage in her career



cannot be understated. The publicity for the film, primarily targeting Latinos, also marked the beginning of a preoccupation with Lopez's body in her star promotion as well, although this Latino-oriented press coverage had a drastically different valence than the body-emphasizing coverage that would target non-Latinos in the following year.

In a similar manner to the tribute articles that had eulogized Selena's life, news of the movie that was to tell her life story was promoted in massive press coverage in both English- and Spanish-language magazines and newspapers, talk shows and entertainment news programs. Responding to a well-publicized, nationwide casting call for the actress who would play the adult Selena, but with a leg up in having worked for Nava before, Jennifer Lopez was still a little-known actress when she beat out a purported 22,000 other women vying for the role.

Lopez thus was promoted as a star simply by being cast in the role. She received her first million-dollar paycheck for the film, while the newly established Latino-oriented print media also offered Lopez her first major star publicity. For instance, in a moment of Latino-oriented synergy, *Latina* magazine put her on their inaugural cover in February 1997, before *Selena* was released.

In portraying Selena, Lopez filled the shoes of a Latina heroine of mythic, even saint-like proportions to many in the Mexican American community and a legend even among non-Latinos. Dyer, in his exploration of the star construction of African American actor-singer Paul Robeson in the 1930s and 1940s, underscores a parallel in Robeson's career to Jennifer-as-Selena, as Robeson also played a number of historic black icons (*Heavenly*). His portrayals of black heroes well known to white audiences, Dyer argues, were a part of his cross-racial appeal, as the actor in this process acquired some of the positive valence that previously had been attributed to such legendary individuals in their life. This also arguably was the case for Lopez in her turn as Selena.

The film's promotional poster and other advertising capitalized in turn on Lopez's uncanny resemblance to the late Tejano star when in costume and makeup. Even so, there was an initial backlash among Mexican Americans against the casting of a Puerto Rican actress in the role, as Negrón-Mutañer discusses. To circumvent this criticism, the strategy of the film promotion targeting the Latino audience apparently was to establish Lopez's authenticity as a Latina and *Puertorriqueña* and thus appropriateness for the role. Published interviews in the Latino-oriented print media, on Spanish-language talk shows, and with Latino reporters in the mainstream press focused heavily on such topics as Lopez's family, Puerto Rican heritage, and ability to speak Spanish, if somewhat broken Spanish. For instance, Lopez told reporter Alisa Valdes that she could speak Spanish, though not without some difficulty. "I know the words, and I have an accent," Lopez explained (D4).

The emphasis on Lopez's body that surfaced in the publicity targeting Latino moviegoers at this time also appears to have been prompted by the aforementioned backlash. Many of Lopez's interviews eventually turned to discussion of the fact that she didn't use any padding to play the bottom-heavy singer who often had worn body-hugging stage costumes. True to the role, Lopez looks decidedly zaftig as Selena, as is evidenced in photo stills from the film.

Such discussion often was initiated by Lopez herself, seemingly to offer proof that she could authentically embody Selena. Negrón-Mutaner describes how Jennifer Lopez's appearances on Spanish-language talk shows often would progress during this period:

As in other talk shows during the promotion of *Selena*, there came a moment during the interview when the question had to be posed to Jennifer Lopez: "Todo eso es tuyo?" (Is that body for real?) In other words, is that big butt yours or is it prosthetic? ... Jennifer Lopez smiled as if she had been waiting a long time for this moment. She stood up,

gave a 360 degree turn, patted her butt, and triumphantly sat down. “Todo es mio.” It’s all mine (186).

A similar exchange took place in a brief story on Lopez in the January 1, 1997 issue of *People in Español*, when she chosen as one of the magazine’s “25 Most Beautiful [Stars].” “Is that butt yours, or is it padded?” Lopez was asked in regard to her role in *Selena*. She laughed, and again said, “Todo es mio [It’s all mine]” (89). She appears as an innocent, curvy Girl Next Door in the photograph that accompanied the article, moreover, attesting to a non-sexual interpretation of voluptuous Latina bodies that is arguably not matched in the English-language media.

Lopez was lauded even before the film was released for her intelligent portrayal of Selena, particularly in capturing the late singer’s warm and charismatic public performance style. Reviews after the film’s release, in turn, were lukewarm but overwhelmingly positive about Lopez’s performance. Critics described Lopez as “vibrant” and “electrifying” in the role,<sup>28</sup> while *Rolling Stone* began its review with the statement: “Jennifer Lopez excels as Selena” (April 17, 1997). Her performance also garnered her a Golden Globe nomination for Best Actress. If anything, as some critics commented, the character was perhaps too perfect, very likely a result of Selena’s father, Abraham Quintanilla, serving as executive producer of the film.

As *Selena* producer Moctesuma Esparza has noted, the financial success of the film would prove to be a boon to future Latino-oriented projects. It grossed almost \$12 million its opening weekend, finishing second in box office earnings for the week. The film, which had been produced for \$20 million, eventually earned over \$35 million in domestic box office alone, from mostly Latino audiences (Gardner 2E). While this was nowhere near the \$54.2 million grossed

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<sup>28</sup> “Lopez Can’t Lift *Selena* Above the Ordinary.” *San Francisco Chronicle*. March 21, 1997. Roger Ebert, “Selena.” *Chicago Sun-Times*. March 21, 1997.

by *La Bamba* in 1987, it was enough to highlight the continuing potential of the Latino moviegoing audience and to launch Lopez's career.

Jennifer Lopez's star undoubtedly rose with the release of the film. Having incarnated Selena on the big screen, Lopez was embraced in the Spanish-language broadcast and print media as a reigning Latina star. Publicity for Lopez in the English-language media after this splash was low key, however. A distinctly bifurcated publicity strategy to target Latino and non-Latino audiences appears to have begun in the marketing of Lopez as a potential star at this point in her career. In the few interviews and other coverage that Lopez garnered in the English-language press, Lopez's Latin ethnicity tends to be downplayed and her Bronx roots emphasized. Lopez's Latin heritage and family, on the other hand, were the primary focus of her press in the Spanish-language media.

Lopez appeared in two other films in 1997, *Blood and Wine* and *Anaconda*, though both were overshadowed by her success in *Selena*. In *Blood and Wine*, Lopez played Gabriela, a Cuban immigrant nanny and the girlfriend of Alex, a morally bankrupt wine dealer turned jewel thief, played by Jack Nicholson. A character who initially seems no more than a sexy ethnic fetish, particularly given the camera work in a few scenes that subtly highlight Lopez's body in short dresses, Gabriela eventually shows more integrity and moral fiber than both Alex and his estranged stepson Jason, who also had taken a liking to her. While some critics overlooked Lopez's performance in this girlfriend role, John Anderson of the *Los Angeles Times* praised her ability to fill the shoes of the femme fatale in the film, asserting that "Lopez, high-heeled and high-maintenance, simmers volcanically while ... proving that movie bad girls, sometimes, are simply bad" (Feb. 21, 1997).

In contrast Lopez's other role of 1997, in *Anaconda*, was less ambiguous and distinctly challenged old Latin spitfire myths. In this film, a smart B-film sendup directed by Luis Llosa, Lopez starred as a resourceful documentary

filmmaker, Terri Flores, who, along with her film crew, must face down a killer anaconda and equally deadly human villain in the Amazonian jungle. As such the role of Terri Flores was unique in terms of the foregrounding of her agency in the narrative—HBO Film Reviews described Flores as a “take charge Latina”<sup>29</sup>—while the role simultaneously played to traditional expectations through exploiting Lopez's beauty. As the *San Francisco Examiner* put it, Llosa provided moviegoers with “beautiful people, roasted evenly to a golden brown, clad in skimpy clothing that sticks to their sexy, well-lit sweat” (April 11, 1997). Most notably, the film skewered traditional patterns of Latina representation in scenes such as the one in which Lopez as Flores tricks the villain, played by Jon Voight, into trusting her by deliberately performing the harlot role.

Ultimately, *Anaconda* made a healthy profit, grossing almost \$70 million (Gardner 2E), and thus was beneficial to Lopez's career. As a formulaic thriller that showcased an animatronic snake, it was not taken particularly seriously, however. In contrast, Lopez's next role, in Stephen Soderberg's *Out of Sight* (1998), and the star promotion efforts generated around the time of its release would be instrumental in Lopez's increasing stardom.

### **LOPEZ'S RISING STARDOM AND “CROSSOVER BUTT”<sup>30</sup>**

In the next stage in Lopez's career, a concerted effort was made to market the actress to non-Latino audiences through various publicity tactics, many of which included an embracing of ambivalent and contradictory historical tropes regarding Latina bodies, beauty, and sexuality. As mentioned previously, an emphasis on Lopez's body, and especially her *derrière*, was the overriding feature of this period of publicity, primarily in 1998, when Lopez was introduced to non-Latino audiences. The inherent contradictions of this star discourse colored and

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<sup>29</sup> HBO Film Reviews. Available [www.hbo.com/Filmreviews/reviews/anaconda.shtml](http://www.hbo.com/Filmreviews/reviews/anaconda.shtml).

<sup>30</sup> A term coined by *Chicago Tribune* journalist Teresa Wiltz.

ultimately assisted in Lopez's entrance into the Hollywood A-list star system in this period. In this section I reconstruct and explore the ultimate valence of these promotional efforts that comprised Lopez's "crossover."

Lopez's rising status in 1997 was announced in the \$2 million paycheck negotiated for her next film role, that of a police detective opposite George Clooney's thief in the Jersey Films production *Out of Sight*. *Variety* announced that Cynthia Shelton-Drake of UTA, then Lopez's agent, had originally asked for \$5 million for Lopez, however. While Shelton-Drake had emphasized that Lopez was a rising star and could draw in Latino moviegoers, particularly given how well *Selena* and *Anaconda* had performed, she had not been able to convince the Jersey Films team to pay this amount. "What will the snake get for his next picture?" *Variety* quipped, commentary that appears to scoff at the thought of paying a Latina Lopez's asking price ("Lopez to Star").

Despite ambivalence that may have existed within the mainstream film industry, Lopez had in fact quickly become the reigning star of the U.S. Latino-oriented media, however. Lopez appeared on her second cover of *Latina*, a vision of understated elegance in a satin dress and hair pulled back, school marm fashion, in February 1998. While she did not win a Golden Globe for *Selena*, she was awarded Best Actress at the 1998 American Latino Media (ALMA) Awards, held annually by the Latino advocacy group the National Council of La Raza, for her performance.<sup>31</sup> At the awards show in Pasadena, she was the star around whom there was the most buzz that night, I observed from the audience that evening.

Lopez had no intention of settling for her status thus far, however. As she has stated in numerous interviews, Lopez was interested in pursuing her career as

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<sup>31</sup> The ALMA Awards, formerly called the Bravo Awards, have been held since 1994 to celebrate Latino performers in film, television, and, more recently, music video, who have contributed to the "outstanding artistic achievement, impact, and enhancement of the image of Latinos" (National Council of La Raza "History").

far as it could go, and this likely played a part in her switch to new management. In 1998, she switched agents, from Shelton-Drake at UTA to Jeff Berg, the president of ICM and thus its most highly visible agent. She also switched from personal manager Eric Gold of Gold-Miller to Benny Medina of Handprint Entertainment, notable as mentioned previously for his past successes managing such stars as Will Smith and perhaps not coincidentally, Sean Combs.

Medina is notable not only for his prior work as a manager of talent and as a music executive, but also for serving as the producer and in fact inspiration for the comedy series *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, which starred his client Smith and was based loosely on his own childhood. While Medina was unavailable to offer comment, a focus on the career trajectory of Will Smith from his Fresh Prince days as a rap artist, to his later role in the successful comedy series, to his current status as an A-List actor and star offer some illumination with respect to the possible career strategies that Medina has planned with Lopez. For one, Medina has established a track record of launching non-white stars from an initial, ethnic and multicultural fan base, as well as through multi-media and synergistic marketing. His youth-oriented promotional strategies also are evident in a quote from Medina in 1992, when he was an executive with Warner Bros. Records black music division and launching a new label. He told *Variety* at the time that their “focus and attention is on the youth market... In reflecting that, there are a bunch of things going on in the urban market, but that means youth more than race” (“Benny Medina,” March 4, 1992).

These strategies are evident when looking at Lopez’s publicity in early 1998, a period when she had no film releases and thus few obvious opportunities for public exposure. In this period, Jennifer Lopez made several moves that rekindled the discussion of her body in the media, this time in the mainstream media. In an interview for *Movieline*’s cover story in February 1998 (notably, the magazine’s annual “Sex” issue), Lopez candidly discussed, seemingly without

prompting, her curvy body and its uniqueness among the ranks of Hollywood actresses. Asked what nickname she might like to be called by the press, she declared:

The first thing that came to my head was the 'Butt' Girl because that separates me from everyone else. I love my body. I really, really dig my curves. It's all me and men love it. Some guys like skinny girls, but they're missing out. When a dress is on a woman, it shouldn't look like it's on a coat hanger. So many girls here are so thin – in fact nobody else in Hollywood really has my type of body. My husband calls it 'La Guitarra,' like the shape of a guitar, which I love because that was always my ideal woman growing up. So call me the 'Guitar Girl.'! (Rebello 93).

Lopez appeared in the cover photo in a front-view Jessica Rabbit pose, wearing nothing but a white fur stole wrapped strategically around her body, a first step in the media construction of a star image that emphasized extraordinary sex appeal. She also was quoted in the article pointedly criticizing several Hollywood actresses and actors, including Gwyneth Paltrow, Winona Ryder, and Wesley Snipes, which prompted subsequent reaction stories in the press and marked the beginning of the media construction of Lopez as an outspoken "diva."

Lopez also participated in other choices in her public appearances in this period that contributed to the 1998 "butt obsession." At awards shows in the early months of 1998, Lopez appeared in skin-tight, slinky dresses that made her back and rump a focal point. These dresses garnered attention for Lopez in the media reviews of the events, as newspaper and magazine articles and their accompanying photographs of Lopez demonstrate. The reactions of the entertainment news media ranged from that of one Golden Globes reviewer, who blasted Lopez for wearing a dress that was "two sizes too small,"<sup>32</sup> to media reports, especially by male media professionals, that pointedly trumpeted Lopez's beauty and style in these butt-emphasizing outfits. As one reviewer declared,



“Best dressed [at the Oscars]: Jennifer Lopez. OK, so this is a man’s perspective” (Saunders 38A).

Capitalizing on Lopez’s Latin ethnicity, *Out of Sight* distributor Universal Pictures developed a two-pronged advertising campaign in order to distinctly target Latino moviegoers. The campaign included trailers broadcast on Spanish-language networks, ads that were placed in Spanish-language print publications, and the posting of promotional posters in predominantly Latino neighborhoods (Halter 132). Capturing the non-Latino audience was also vital for the film’s box office success, however. Thus when *Out of Sight* opened June 26, 1998 to extremely positive reviews and decent returns with a \$12 million opening weekend (Internet Movie Database), Jennifer Lopez had proved her bankability as a crossover star and A-list actress.

The release also served to add more fuel to the fire of Lopez’s increasingly sexy and body-focused star image in the entertainment news media, with this construction more than likely promoted in addition by Lopez’s management team. For there was seemingly endless attention in the star-publicity spheres of talk shows and entertainment magazines at this time, not so much to Lopez’s achievement in succeeding to carve a space for herself in the film industry, but to a seemingly trivial item: her butt.

In this case, adeptly playing up tropes of the seductive and irresistible Latina body, both in *Out of Sight* and in public appearances, garnered Lopez a great deal of media attention. With respect to the film, Lopez’s embodiment of Federal Marshall Karen Cisco was seen as particular evidence of Lopez’s beauty and sexual energy. The on-screen chemistry between Lopez and co-star George Clooney was played up by Soderberg to maximum effect through a number of cinematic strategies. The camera lingers on Lopez’s body and briefly on her rear

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted by news anchor Susan Campos on the NBC television news program *Saturday Today*. KXAN, Austin, Texas. Mar. 21, 1998.

end in a few scenes, while the lighting and use of close-ups emphasize both Lopez and Clooney's attractiveness and the sexual tension in the film.

As a result, while Lopez's portrayal in the film was seen by critics as having substance as well as style, many reviewers also made mention of her sexy body or general sensuality in *Out of Sight*, describing her as, among other things, "scandalously sensual" (Kemp 16) and a "smoldering femme fatale" (Matthews B3) who wielded "Hispanic pocket dynamism" (Curtis 26) and "sexily slinky powers" (Hornaday 1E). Adding fuel to this discourse, Lopez appeared at the *Out of Sight* premiere in a dress that "caused a near riot," according to Jeryl Brunner of *In/Style* magazine (184), and willingly spoke with reporters about her body, seemingly without prompting.

A number of interviews in magazines and newspapers and on television talk shows included similar discussion with Lopez in the weeks following the film's domestic and international releases. In illustration, all but one of the feature stories on Lopez that was published during this period make mention of Lopez's body. Subsequently, the publicity born from this period admires, obsesses on, and ruminates on Lopez's backside.

In October and November 1998, countless media outlets around the country and the world reported the "news" of Jennifer Lopez's large and well-rounded buttocks and lack of desire to change her body to conform to Hollywood ideals, a discourse that appeared at best ambivalent with respect to her rising power in the Hollywood scene. To provide a thumbnail overview of the media coverage, multitudes of newspaper columnists, many adding their own commentary to the discourse, wrote about the aforementioned *Entertainment Weekly* story and photos and what they described as the new, public obsession with Lopez's rear end. Christopher Goodwin, writing for the Style section of London's *Sunday Times*, for example, praised "Jennifer Lopez's bottom, her

backside, her butt, her rear, her rump, her posterior, her gorgeously proud buttocks, her truly magnificent, outstanding booty” (6).

And television notables were not to be left out of the fray. Jay Leno, after waxing poetic on the virtues of the Jennifer Posterior, twirled Lopez when she came on to the stage of his late-night talk show so that his live and television audiences could get an eyeful. Almost simultaneously, in the October 1998 issue of *Premiere*, “Jennifer Lopez’s ass” was declared the “feminine asset” currently In in Hollywood circles (“Old Guard/Vanguard” 42). Meanwhile *Time*, a magazine known for its emphasis on hard news, published a brief interview with Lopez, using the teaser “Jennifer Lopez discusses her derriere” in its table of contents to entice readers (Stein 97). With the entire frenzy in mind, it’s not surprising that Lopez was spoofed later in the month, on the Oct. 17 episode of *Saturday Night Live*. On the show, guest host Lucy Lawless portrayed Lopez in a comedy sketch, with a gargantuan rear end and ego (“A & E”).

It is difficult to come to definite conclusions regarding this contradictory moment in Jennifer Lopez’s star construction. This period of publicity, which effectively marketed Lopez as a Latina crossing over and into the traditionally white star system, was extremely contradictory. Ultimately, in this discourse Lopez’s ethnic difference was simultaneously celebrated, categorized, and commodified. Lopez was simultaneously an authentic Latina breaking into the ranks of the hegemonically white star system, a fetishized Latina body, and a commodified media spectacle, signifying contradicting ideological thrusts in her star construction.

To break this down further, Lopez was not constructed as a victim in this discourse. Lopez appeared to have the upper hand, or to at least be content with, this focus on her body. Far from being uncomfortable, she appeared to leap at opportunities to express her bodily and (to a lesser extent) ethnic pride. For example, Lopez continuously stated that she felt no need to change her body in

order to attain success as a Hollywood actress. “I don’t know what it is with everyone,” Lopez said in *The (Singapore) Straits Times*. She continued:

I guess I’m a little hippy. Latinas and black women have a certain body type. We’re curvy. It’s in the history books. I didn’t start a revolution. But I don’t mind if the big-butt women in the world are a little happier because of a few cameramen’s obsession with my behind (Tong 1, L7).

In discussion of her aspirations for her acting career, Lopez demonstrated a strong desire to not be pigeonholed as a Latina, describing herself as an “actress who is Latin—not a Latin actress as in one who just does Latin roles” (Gristwood 4). But when it came to her body, Lopez made no excuses. By proudly displaying her curvaceous body in this manner, Jennifer Lopez in this time period can be seen both as empowered and as an empowering role model for young women and in particular for young Latinas. In the process she and her management team also took in hand how her body would be interpreted by the mainstream media, making what easily could have been considered a fatal detriment into a trademark and positive selling point.

Furthermore, this publicity ultimately served as a reminder of the tensions inherent in American beauty standards, given the increasingly multicultural nature of its population, and served to challenge those hegemonic ideals. Given that Lopez’s appearance in these days repeatedly was described in the news media in positive terms as beautiful as well as non-traditional in its voluptuousness, it appears that Lopez posed a challenge to standards of beauty in 1998 simply by unapologetically being herself. The ripple effects were soon felt in women’s fashion magazines that called attention to how Lopez was helping to challenge beauty and body ideals. For example, Jean Godfrey-June, the beauty/fitness director of *Elle* magazine, trumpeted in November 1998, “Thanks to Jennifer Lopez, butts are back” (224). Lopez was given further credibility as an American

beauty when she signed a contract to appear as a spokesmodel in L'Oreal cosmetics advertising.

Lopez was simultaneously constructed as a socially available and enthusiastic body in this publicity, however, and thus categorized under a familiar label. Notions of uniquely excessive, "savage body parts," discussed previously as the legacy of colonialist tropes of the body (Sault 5), were emphasized in the process in the myriad mentions of her supposedly exaggerated rear end. As discussed in Chapter 1, through such representational dynamics the potential transgressive nature of non-white celebrities can be neutralized or contained. The end result is that non-white stars, while potentially offering a challenge to the status quo, also at times serve an opposing function as "normalizing" role models of the social pecking order, as Bordo has pointed out (254). From this perspective, Lopez was akin to Latinas who have been constructed similarly before her. She can be viewed in this manner as serving as a modern-day, Puerto Rican Hottentot Venus. It was hard to focus on Lopez's acting skills in this time period, when all that could be seen was her backside.

Finally, in this period Jennifer Lopez also was effectively constructed as a media commodity. For one, the "booty news" was visual, humorous, and succinct. Thus it was easily disseminated in various media forms, particularly in the spectacle-focused cinema of attractions of the new New Hollywood. In this process, Lopez was trademarked as a unique and perhaps most useful to her career, particularly videogenic star body. Whether audience members or media representatives admired or derided her, through this glaring emphasis Jennifer Lopez became a topic of casual conversation and a household name, and thus an increasingly lucrative star commodity.

### LOPEZ SLIMS DOWN AND MOVES UP *ON THE 6*

Lopez's body and appearance were soon to change, however; rendering conclusions that might be drawn regarding her earlier appearance problematic. While Lopez's star image in 1998 aptly illustrates the potential tensions inherent in non-white or crossover stardom, in 1999 her career and star image shifted considerably. Lopez underwent a dramatic physical transformation, which entailed dropping a reported two dress sizes. As I describe below, the unveiling of her new look coincided with the launching of a music and music video career.

Lopez's debut CD, *On The 6*, was released in June 1999, just a week after the release of Ricky Martin's *Living on My Own*, along with a body-emphasizing music video for the single, "If You Had My Love" in heavy rotation on the MTV television network. Photographs of the newly svelte Lopez were showcased in the packaging of the CD and in her print publicity at the time. Tommy Mottola of Sony Music, who signed her to his Work Group label, also had successfully launched the careers of such Latino singers as Gloria Estefan and Julio Iglesias. Sony record producers Emilio Estefan and Jellybean Benitez also assisted with the album, which reflected its multiple cultural roots in its sound. Lopez would later describe it to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter as "pop music with influences of Latin and R&B music, urban" (Morales 4).

Music critics panned Lopez's weak voice, although this did not deter album sales. David Browne of *Entertainment Weekly* praised the "steamy" picture of Lopez on the album cover before remarking that her voice was "higher and thinner than expected—not embarrassing, but sadly ordinary" (83), while Richard Harrington of the *Washington Post* declared it as merely a "pleasant project that's likely to get more attention than it deserves" (C1). Nevertheless, the album eventually went double platinum, with over 2 million sales, and garnered a number of hit singles.

Lopez's new look garnered as much media attention as had the blitz on her body in her earlier, softer state. Aside from her slimmed-down body, Lopez appeared to have undergone subtle cosmetic surgery to her nose and jawline, as well as often sporting blonde highlights, changes which arguably had a whitening effect. This transformation, reportedly encouraged by her management, undoubtedly was meant to increase her appeal to non-Latino audiences. As such it serves as illustration of what Berry and Negra discuss as the "Americanizing" star makeover. Some Latino critics took offense to the changes to Lopez's appearance. Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez of the *Los Angeles Times*, among other critics, declared:

It unfortunately seems that in the world of American pop culture, Latinos are only palatable as long as they appeal to a mainstream Caucasian standard of beauty. Jennifer Lopez seems to have figured this one out: her naturally wavy, dark brown hair has been lightened and straightened, and her once-fuller body has been whittled down by a fitness guru to something indistinguishable from the lean, muscular Madonna (F16).

Several news reports speculated on how Lopez had made the changes. "Her incredible shrinking booty is this year's greatest mystery this side of *The Blair Witch Project*," *Vanity Fair* declared in December 1999. *Parade* newspaper supplement, after checking with Lopez's management, reported that Lopez in fact made the changes through an intense exercise regimen with fitness trainer Radu Teodorescu over a period of three months.<sup>33</sup>

Photographs of Lopez in her pre-1997 roles and publicity also became difficult to locate in this time period, indicating a desire on the part of Lopez and her management to de-emphasize Lopez's career choices and particularly

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<sup>33</sup> Despite Lopez's transformation, Chris Rock made Lopez the "butt" of many jokes on the MTV Music Awards in September 1999. "She came here with two limos: one for her and one for her butt" was one such one-liner (qtd. in Rush and Molloy 18). His good intentions while making these cracks subsequently were the focus of later celebrity news items that ran in the print media.

appearance in her early career. In my own research I found that it was no longer easy to locate such photos through Jennifer Lopez-related Internet sites, which increasingly were maintained professionally by Sony Music or Lopez's management company, Handprint Entertainment.

Lopez's body proved to be the ultimate marketing tool in this stage of her promotion as a star property. She continued to emphasize her still curvy, but otherwise athletic and svelte figure, calling further attention to it through the wearing of couture fashion and trendy looks put together by some of the top fashion stylists and makeup artists in the industry, who increasingly traveled with her to public appearances. Lopez in fact became known for her large entourage of employees, many of whom provided on the spot grooming assistance, including personal trainers, fashion stylists, hair stylists, and makeup artists.<sup>34</sup>

For her efforts, photos of Lopez consistently appear in magazines that feature celebrities wearing fashionable clothes such as *In/Style*, *People*, *Us*, and *Premiere*, as well as on entertainment news television programs. Lopez and her stylists and favorite designers also have been recognized through Lopez's earning of a number of celebrity fashion awards, including the Most Fashionable Female Artist in the VH1/Vogue Fashion Awards in 1999 and the Versace Award in 2000. In only its second year, the Versace Award, created to honor "the person who best continues to represent the boundless energy, infinite creativity and fearlessness that was Versace," had been awarded to Madonna the year prior.

Through such work, Jennifer Lopez is sold as a star who has transformed herself into a more beautiful—and less ethnic—woman than she was when she entered the industry. Just as Madonna's underwent a "gradual physical makeover from fleshy 'virgin' to lean machine'" and effectively marketed herself as a rising

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<sup>34</sup> See for example, *W Magazine*, "Hard Rock Hairstyles: How Rock Stars Set the Trends and Why;" Emma Forrest, "For Girls Who Want Real Power and Glamour, A Stylist is the Only Thing to Be," *The Daily Telegraph* (London); David Lister, "Lopez Demands 10 Dressing Rooms at BBC TOTP," *The Independent* (London).



star in the eighties (Epstein 194), so Lopez's makeover from fleshy Latina to lean, ethnically ambiguous, and expensively groomed and clothed beauty has assisted in marketing Lopez as an evolving and rising celebrity figure. As a part of this element of commodification that has become integral to Lopez's image, designer clothes, jewelry, and cosmetics are increasingly associated with Lopez and advertised in her pictorials. She is positioned in this manner as a new, and newly commodified beauty of the millennium.

This narrative of Ethnic Girl Next Door Who Makes Good, combined with myriad details regarding her beauty routines, also "opens" the Lopez star image up for easy audience identification and emulation, particularly with respect to her teen girl fans. As journalist Joanna Briscoe describes her popularity:

The J-Lo homegirl vibe is strong, calculated and polished to perfection. While reportedly given to tantrum-throwing demands, vast entourages and fastidious dietary requirements, she retains a strong and knowing streak of the Bronx beauty parlor. Her fans are mostly teenage girls, who can probably just emulate the tamer of her looks from the local shopping mall (25).

As a part of this discourse, Lopez's grooming routines often are discussed openly in her press coverage, which echoes the manner in which Rita Hayworth's transformation was discussed in earlier decades. These mentions encourage fans to try out the many beauty tactics used by Lopez, whether it be working out, skin bronzing, hair coloring, or eyebrow shaping.<sup>35</sup> The intense focus on this "work" of beauty figures heavily into Lopez's current star image and related publicity discourses. On the premiere episode of the MTV series *Becoming* in June 2001, for example, twin sisters were given makeovers and new fashions by stylists who

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<sup>35</sup> See for example, Leah Garchik, "Brows of the Stars;" Maria Montoya, "Bronze Beauties—Sans the Sun;" Jill Radsken, "Sense of Style: Women Go to Great Lengths for Hair;" Rebecca Stevenson, "The Seductive Yet Funky Look of Jennifer Lopez;" and Jeffrey Scott, "Splitting Hairs?" for just a tiny sampling of this sort of publicity.

had previously worked with Lopez, so that they might more completely emulate the star when they imitated her performance in a music video.

Another characteristic of Lopez's recent publicity is that there is a great deal of it: Since 1999 there has been a glut of coverage on all aspects of Lopez's life; everything about her life seems to be considered fodder for the celebrity gossip mills. As Violet Brown, urban music buyer for Wherehouse music stores, said in *Los Angeles Times* article, "She's on the news every night" (Jan. 22, 2001). Some of topics that have been raised in the entertainment news media are a rumor that she insured her body for \$1 billion dollars (which Lopez later denied), stories of Lopez's supposed diva-like tantrums and demands, and discussion of her controversial photographs on magazine covers.

Lopez also has been romantically linked to a variety of men in the tabloids in the last few years, including her first husband, Ojani Noa, singer Marc Anthony, Sony Music executive Tommy Mottola, Sean Combs, and second husband Cris Judd. The subject of much tabloid gossip was her "are-they-or-aren't they" dating relationship and eventual breakup from Sean "Puffy" Combs, a popular rap singer and head of his own hip hop entertainment and talent management company, Bad Boy Entertainment. His skirmishes with the law and the end of their relationship, announced officially in February 2001, also tallied a great deal of media coverage, to the extent that the lack of major press on Lopez's recent marriage to Judd stood in marked contrast.

Lopez has continued to play up an emphasis on the body in her appearances at awards shows and other public events. At the 2000 Grammy Awards, Lopez wore a gravity-defying, plunging green Donatella Versace dress that perhaps was "the most talked about outfit in recent memory," in part because those who saw it wondered at how she kept it from flying open ("Starstruck"). A

number of news articles took on just this topic in the days to follow.<sup>36</sup> The 2001 Oscars brought a new focus: Her gray Chanel Gown had a see-through top that dictated that she could only be filmed by cameras from the neck up when she presented an award. Lopez now makes headlines at awards shows no matter what she wears—it's news when she wears an outfit considered "relatively chaste," as was the case at the Tribute to Style benefit in Los Angeles in April 2001 (Erhman 7).

With respect to her film roles since 1999, Jennifer Lopez further shook up her image with a role she took in the futuristic psychological thriller *The Cell* in 2000. Focused on the tormented dreamscape of a sadistic killer, whose mind Lopez's character can enter through the use of a special machine, the film was downbeat but nonetheless allowed Lopez to display her beauty and body in a wide variety of flamboyant costumes designed by Eiko Ishioka. The film was indeed panned by critics as stronger on visuals than narrative, but in process Lopez came out generally unscathed in reviews. The film also had a solid opening at the box office, earning \$17.2 million and the number one spot its opening weekend.

#### **"J.LO-CITY" IN THE MILLENNIUM <sup>37</sup>**

The release of Lopez's second album, *J.Lo*, in the same week in January 2001 as her film *The Wedding Planner*, demonstrated the potential for Lopez as a driving force for synergistic media production. These double releases were accompanied by a media blitz, including such manufactured media events as an on-line "Jennifer Lopez Look-alike Contest" sponsored by PlanetHollywood.com and aired briefly on CNN. *The Wedding Planner* was hyped to the extent that *The*

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<sup>36</sup> As one journalist commented, "It was a marvel of physics, involving equal measures of adhesives, balance, and faith" (Zeman 172). The dress in fact was so notorious that it was spoofed numerous times. For instance, animator-writer-actor Trey Parker wore a copy to the 2000 Academy Awards as a joke. Lopez also wore the dress briefly for comedic effect while a host of *Saturday Night Live* on February 10, 2001.

*Hollywood Reporter* commented that it had enough “sufficient prerelease momentum in the marketplace to easily win the race to the theatrical altar, particularly with female viewers” (Jan. 26, 2001).

Lopez’s new nickname of “J.Lo,” announced in the marketing of the CD, also prompted discussion in most media outlets. Interestingly, however, this discussion didn’t include mention of how the new nickname erased one of the main traces of Lopez’s Latin ethnicity. On the other hand, Lopez’s association with Sean Combs in this period and occasional wearing of hip hop fashion, such as the outfit she wore to the 2001 American Music Awards, gave Lopez a veneer of “street” credibility that she might not otherwise have experienced, given the trajectory of her film career and star publicity up to this point in time.<sup>38</sup>

While *J.Lo* quickly became the top-selling album not just in the U.S. but also in a number of countries, *The Wedding Planner* offered Lopez uncharted Hollywood territory: the romantic comedy, a genre through which notions of white American femininity have often been reiterated since the days of early sound film (Lent, Schatz *Hollywood Genres*). The story of Mary Fiore, a dateless, overworked wedding planner, was originally written as Armenian and later changed to Italian when Lopez signed on.<sup>39</sup> In the film, Mary meets the man of her dreams only to find she is planning his wedding. As such it offered Lopez the chance to play a decidedly mainstream role in which a “Debbie Reynolds”

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<sup>37</sup> Zeman remarked in the June 2001 *Vanity Fair* that Jennifer Lopez’s selling power had been described by industry pundits as “J.Lo-city” (172).

<sup>38</sup> This striving for urban authenticity reached a controversial point over her use of the N-word in the song “I’m Real” on *J.Lo*, prompting criticism and debates in a number of arenas. Lopez, for her part, made a statement that she had not meant any negative connotation. In the end, the debate drew further attention both to Lopez’s album and to the public trappings that pass for celebrity authenticity and hipness. For further discussion, see Ann Oldenburg, “J.Lo: Not Racist and Not Pregnant;” Alona Wartofsky, “Protesters See No Affection in J.Lo’s Use of Racial Epithet;” and Robert Jackson, “Letters: In My Opinion: Exploiting Black Culture.”

<sup>39</sup> Adam Shankman discusses this script change in the director’s commentary that is included in the *The Wedding Planner* DVD.

undoubtedly would have been cast in Rita Moreno's starlet era, a sign of the progress with respect to Latina stardom since the 1960s.

Thus, as in *Out of Sight*, Lopez plays a "white" character in the film, although Fiore's immigrant, Italian roots are emphasized in the narrative. While Latina actors now seldom portray Polynesian, Arab, or Native American roles, as Moreno continually experienced in the 1950s and 1960s, Lopez, a light-skinned Latina, has now been cast as Italian in several roles. In addition, it is notable that critics did not call attention to Lopez's ethnicity in their reviews. Conversely, however, this increasing pattern for Lopez also can be viewed as regressive with respect to the continued erasure of positive *Latina* characters portrayed by Latina stars. Regardless, through portraying non-Latina characters, Lopez calls attention to and challenges the boundaries of whiteness in film. Her roles as Karen Cisco and Mary Fiore in this manner arguably entail a new "bronzing" of Hollywood whiteness that provides rich fodder for further scholarly inquiry.

Columbia Pictures' promotional poster for the film follows the traditions of romantic comedy film promotion to a 'T'. In the poster, Jennifer Lopez, bronzed and sporting long straight hair with blond highlights, reclines against co-star Matthew McConaghey. Both are smiling amiably, but the poses of the two actors imply truce as well as sexual tension. From these visuals and the referent of romantic comedies of past eras, moviegoers can surmise that the film will provide a screwball-inspired clash of gender, but *not* of ethnicity, followed by an ultimate, happy romantic ending.

The film did respectable box office, earning over \$60 million domestically (Internet Movie Database), despite the fact that critics were not particularly impressed. Lopez was not sharply criticized in the reviews, however. Despite some awkwardness and a clunky script, Lopez proved her adeptness with comedy in the role. She was described as "comfortable" in her role by *Daily Variety* (Jan. 22, 2001), while the *LA Weekly* panned the script, the directing, and the "power

failure between its leads,” adding a compliment to Lopez’s appeal: “We know that Lopez can do it: Like Dolly Parton, she has a natural girl-next-door practicality that can morph on a dime into the burnished radiance of a serious *objet de lust*” (Jan. 26, 2001, 37). It appears that even in a role emphasizing innocence, Lopez’s “sexiness” was on the mind of the reviewer, a dynamic reminiscent of the typing that Rita Moreno had such difficulty shaking in her early career.

In another example of distinctly synergistic marketing, Lopez’s next film, *Angel Eyes*, was plugged in April 2001 in conjunction with the unveiling of her new clothes line. In partnership with Andy Hilfiger, brother of designer Tommy Hilfiger, Lopez was putting out a line of urban-influenced street wear, “J.Lo by Jennifer Lopez,” with prices ranging from \$22 to \$850. Given the wide range of prices, fans of all incomes would be able to emulate Lopez through purchasing her clothes. Another interesting aspect of the line with respect to Latina beauty and body ideals was the wide range of sizes. “So from little to voluptuous, everybody gets to be sexy,” Lopez announced at the unveiling (qtd. in *The Associated Press*, April 26, 2001).

In *Angel Eyes*, a moody psychological romance, Lopez plays a New York police officer, Sharon Pogue, of Brazilian and Irish descent (her parents are played by Sonia Braga and Victor Argo), who falls for a mystery man with amnesia. While Lopez’s Latina appearance as Pogue is explained in this case through the character being of partial Latino descent, it is interesting that the actor chosen to play her brother does not look similarly ethnic. Lopez also sported stridently blond hair and a tan for her portrayal, calling attention in the role to the construction of whiteness. Reviews for the film followed a now-familiar route: Lopez was praised for her acting, while the film itself was generally panned as

lackluster and confusing.<sup>40</sup> Despite some negative reviews, however, the film had a \$9.5 million opening weekend, again proving Lopez's box office power.

Moreover, promotion for both *The Wedding Planner* and *Angel Eyes* capitalized on Lopez's rising status; reviews for both films often included snippets of interviews with Lopez, along with accompanying photographs of the star. This publicity also entailed a noticeable downplaying of tropes of the hypersexual, passionate Latina in comparison to the promotion Lopez experienced earlier in her career.

There is no doubt from the promotional materials for *Angel Eyes* as to whose star power was expected to drive the box office receipts. Tellingly, the poster capitalized on Lopez's star image and good looks. The poster is dominated by an out-of-focus, extreme close-up of Lopez in the mist from an early scene of the film, in which Lopez's co-star Jim Caviezel sees Lopez for the first time. Interestingly, Lopez's identity is almost washed out by the literal *whiteness* of the picture, which also renders Lopez's skin far lighter than it appears in the film, while her brown eyes in contrast are highlighted. Given that the film's genre cannot be discerned and that other cast members do not appear in the poster, it can be assumed that this was considered unnecessary and that Lopez's name and image alone would pull in audiences. This appears to confirm what *Vanity Fair* declared in June 2001, that Jennifer Lopez had become a Hollywood star of enough stature and synergy to "open" a movie (Zeman 172), a feat that had not been accomplished since Dolores Del Rio's heyday.

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<sup>40</sup> "Angel Eyes pretty vacant," said the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, while Roger Clarke of the (London) *Independent* gave Lopez a nod: "Perfectly good Lopez performance, perfectly mediocre film" (11).

## WEARING LATINIDAD, WEARING WHITENESS: J.LO AS ETHNIC CHAMELEON

Now beginning to supersede Madonna as the U.S.'s most prolific export, [Jennifer Lopez] is the catch-all superstar who has enacted the American Dream. Her role as Hollywood' leading Latina lady somehow sidesteps both politics and clearly defined race issues. She is the all-American light-skinned Latina with the looks of an airbrushed cyber-heroine: golden, honeyed, not black or white but in-between and changeable. She is slippery, hard to define... (Briscoe 25)

As Lopez's music career continued to develop in tandem with her film career, a new phenomenon already touched upon became evident in her star construction, that of rapidly changing appearance, as *Movieline* called attention to in August 2001 (62). The large roster of beauty and fashion stylists working with Lopez enable her to engage in this turn-on-a-dime visual play, assisted by her light olive skin and quasi-European features, such that Lopez's trademark look ultimately has become that of fashion and ethnic chameleon.<sup>41</sup> Her multiple looks range from "rapper chic" to "classy masterpieces" (62), particularly with respect to divergent looks in her music and film careers. This phenomenon moreover has entailed a play on ethnicity, through Lopez's sporadic use of cosmetic bronzers, changing hairstyles and textures, and wearing of radically diverse fashions at times rife with ethnic and class-related associations. Her hair has run the gamut of looks from straight and blond to dark and curly, while her skin color has occasionally been bronzed to an extreme.

Just to name a few of the many looks she has embodied in public appearances, Lopez has played the role of the Latina erotic object, literally bronzed and glistening (as she appeared in an angelic photograph that graced the cover of the magazine *Notorious* in Sept./Oct. 1999), a (white enough) beach bum (as was the case when she appeared in California surfer girl attire at an



appearance at the Teen Choice Awards 2001), a Puerto Rican home girl (as in hip-hop inspired performances on music videos promoting her *J.Lo* album), and a clean-cut Hollywood diva (as she has appeared at some awards show appearances in 2000 and 2001).

At its most facile this phenomenon can be interpreted simply as a smart promotional campaign that has positioned Lopez as a multi-faceted and synergistic star. In the contemporary media environment, stars must “stand apart from mass merchandise and familiar ‘looks’” in order to carve out a star image that is aesthetically unique, as Epstein states (193). A constantly evolving look only increases potential appeal in this contemporary formulation. As Tommy Mottola has said with respect to the cachet of multi-media performers and in regard to Jennifer Lopez in particular:

In this day and age, the more multi-media, cross-cultural, fashiony things you can put into the mix, the better. Because that’s our society. The consumer accepts it. The consumer sort of craves it. It becomes additional marketing, merchandising and ad tools (Qtd. in Zeman 236).

Within this rubric, Lopez at times plays up a distinctly Latina look which exploits historical tropes that have long been associated with Latina bodies in American culture. But the important distinction is that this is part of a changing repertoire, something optional. For the particular looks that Lopez embodies, ultimately, are not as important as her ability to transform or “unmark” her ethnicity. As Michael Rogin asserts with respect to the “racial crossdressing” of Irish and Jewish performers of blackface (4), Lopez has asserted with these transformations her ability to rise above ethnicity and in fact manipulate it as an accessory in the realm of ever-changing, multicultural media spectacle.

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<sup>41</sup> Negra terms Cher’s similar pattern of transforming her body and appearance and playing with ethnic signifiers throughout her career “ethnic chameleonism” (166).

Interestingly, although Jennifer Lopez has increasingly been compared to Madonna with respect to her constantly evolving image and rising stardom, she generally isn't given similar credit as the mastermind behind these changes. The many mentions of her personal manager, stylists, makeup artists, and the like instead posit Lopez, if anything, as a woman who has shopped well for her handlers or merely as a hard worker with abundant ambition, street smarts and *cohonos*. Jennifer Lopez thus is characterized as merely a primadonna performer whose star image is the construction by a number of mentors rather than as a smart and savvy businesswoman, which raises questions regarding the inscription of ethnicity, class and gender in her star image.

While Lopez is often not given credit for controlling the construction of her star image, the “work” of celebrity appears to never be left out of this picture. Such a construction is strikingly similar to what Rita Moreno experienced in her star publicity in the mid-1950s, and as such stands in sharp contrast to Dolores Del Rio’s image in the late 1920s. In fact, attention is drawn as heavily to the behind-the-scenes manipulations involved in Jennifer Lopez’s star construction, particularly the work of grooming her appearance, as to her appearance itself. Such a construction reflects the current fascination with the creation of celebrity, a twist in contemporary star promotion that can underscore both the potentially democratic nature of stardom and its unattainability by the masses. *Entertainment Weekly’s* music reviewer Tom Sinclair devoted discussion to this topic in his review of *J.Lo* in 2001, stating that as he listened to the album, he imagined a himself as a “sleazy A&R man” approaching Lopez with this patter:

Hey Baby... I imagined saying, I like your style. How’d you like to be a pop star? It takes commitment, sure, but the payoff is huge. You’ve got to do the work, though: Get to the gym and tone that fine bod until your butt’s firm enough to bounce a quarter off of. While you’re at it, you may want to consider some minor cosmetic surgery, a major dental overhaul, and a really expensive wardrobe of sexy designer outfits. If you like, you

might even consider taking some singing lessons, but that's entirely up to you... (Sinclair 73).

## CONCLUSIONS

As of this writing, Jennifer Lopez has reached a level of superstardom in Hollywood that few Latinos or women have ever matched. Lopez's meeting with Queen Elizabeth and entertaining of U.S. troops at a USO concert in Germany in December 2001 have been among her more publicized exploits. Lopez also starred in her own television special in November 2001, when the Puerto Rico concert of her music tour was aired live on NBC, and currently has a new film in release, *Enough* (2002), in which she portrays an abused wife who learns to fight back. Industry confidence in Lopez as a star with profit-making abilities also is evident in the long string of projects in which she is slated to appear in the future. As a part of an NBC television deal, Lopez will star in a comedy series loosely based on her childhood in the Bronx. She also has a number of films "in the can," including *Gigli*, in which Lopez and Ben Affleck star as hitmen who fall in love, and Wayne Wang's upcoming Cinderella tale, *Uptown Girl*.

Undoubtedly, Lopez has proven herself in the Hollywood entertainment industries on the basis of talent, drive, and broad audience appeal. She has also benefited, however, from a new and growing opening for Latina stardom in U.S. and global popular culture particularly evident since the 1990s. In illustration, Lopez has not experienced the same limitations in casting and star promotion that Dolores Del Rio and Rita Moreno experienced in previous decades. As such, the case study of Lopez's career and star promotion illustrates how traditional Hollywood paradigms of racialized casting and promotion are beginning to weaken and be challenged, at least with respect to some Latinas in Hollywood. Even if this shift has not extended much further than Lopez at this point in time, it arguably reflects changing popular tastes in the U.S. and worldwide as well.

Despite this undoubted progress, Lopez's career also amply illustrates a number of compromises traditionally related to the construction of Latina stardom that continue in the present day even in the case of the most successful of performers. The first is the utilization of ethnic stereotypes in such star promotion. The continuing power of historical tropes associated with Latina bodies in the shaping of Latina stardom cannot be ignored with respect to the fact that Lopez gained status within Hollywood first through prominently calling attention to her body and particularly her curvaceous backside.

Lopez has successfully moved beyond the necessity for such dynamics in her publicity, however, through alternately embracing age-old tropicalist tropes of Latinidad and transgressing those tropes in the evolving construction of her public image. In this manner, the promotion of Jennifer Lopez-as-star skillfully plays to the current tension and ambivalence in the popular imagination with respect to such tropes and in general toward Latinos in the U.S. Lopez's Latin ethnicity is simultaneously celebrated, categorized, and commodified in this process.

The second compromise in Lopez's star promotion has entailed conforming, at least in part, to Hollywood beauty standards. As detailed in the case study, Jennifer Lopez furthered her career in 1999 through transforming and controlling her body and foregrounding this new look in her publicity. Like Madonna in the previous decade, Lopez quickly reduced as she expanded with respect to her status and star image. As such, Lopez's evolving image reflects the demands of the contemporary star system in an industry in which actresses, regardless of ethnicity, are now required have tightly controlled and enhanced, impossibly beautiful bodies in order to even be considered in the A-list ranks. Continuing racial hegemony undoubtedly underpins such beauty standards; non-white stars necessarily must conform to these ideals at least to some extent if they wish to achieve a level of success in Hollywood.

Lopez's star promotion since 1999 confounds any conclusions that might be drawn regarding her career and public image prior to this period, however. For one, Lopez's star construction is becoming increasingly complex as she has risen to become a successful multimedia performer. Her publicity has taken on a decidedly multi-niche marketed and multi-image bent, catering to differences in age as well as ethnicity and gender. As such, she is marketed to youth through music videos and her albums, to women through romantic comedy films and fashion magazines, to young female fans in teen magazine articles and MTV programs that encourage identification and imitation, to boys and men in "sexy" publicity photographs and articles, and to Latinos in the occasional Latina film role and coverage in the Latino-oriented print and broadcast media.

This complexity is even more pronounced in her recent positioning as an ethnic chameleon. This has entailed Jennifer Lopez embracing not just an ambiguous ethnicity, but ethnicity-as-commodity or accessory, as I discuss in the case study. Lopez recently has "worn" ethnicity on some occasions and whiteness on others, both capitalizing on and playing with tropes of the Latina body in divergent ways. Such ethnic adaptability is quite distinct from the limited, all-purpose ethnicity of previous eras, however. Lopez has portrayed a non-Latina ethnic female just once, when she portrayed an American Indian woman in Oliver Stone's *U-Turn*. Rather, Lopez is constructed as an "is she or isn't she" ethnic/non-ethnic star body, a process in which realities of race and ethnicity are submerged and ethnicity as spectacle is instead foregrounded.

This can be seen as a highly paradoxical process. Lopez gains agency and arguably whiteness through her refusal to be tied only to Latinidad in the "pigmentocracy" of the Hollywood star system, to extend a term coined by anthropologist Alejandro Lipschutz (qtd. in Stam 47). This embracing of "ethnicity-lite" arguably involves erasure of both her own history and that of the hegemony of whiteness in the Hollywood star system (Halter 78). As Laura

Browder argues, “while ethnic impersonators may free themselves from the historical trap of an unwanted identity by passing into a new one, their success rests on their ability to manipulate stereotypes, thus further miring their audience in essentialist racial and ethnic categories” (10). On the other hand, the eraser is never fully invisible in this process, as Lopez’s star discourse often calls attention to it, particularly in news coverage that underscores the many manipulations that she puts herself through to engage in this constant metamorphosis. By calling attention to the erasure, the construction of ethnicity, gender, and class are in fact highlighted throughout Lopez’s star discourse.

In addition, it also is important to consider not only Lopez’s ethnic fluidity in her aesthetic appearance, but that she has now played a number of white film characters without comment or criticism from reviewers. This contemporary industrial flexibility and neutral critical reaction stands in contrast to how Dolores Del Rio was at times received after the transition to sound and in particular with the scenario that Rita Moreno faced in the 1950s and '60s. In this manner, Lopez’s film performances have in fact entailed an interesting Latinization or “bronzing” of the definition of whiteness in Hollywood film. Further research could fruitfully explore in more depth the impact of Lopez starring in these roles, which challenges former Hollywood conventions.

## Chapter 5

### Still Looking for Brown-Skinned Girls:

#### Speculations on Latina Stardom *Sin Fronteras/Without Borders*

As I was drafting this chapter, I presented a guest lecture at DePaul University, a large, Catholic university in Chicago, on Jennifer Lopez and her rise to stardom. In the discussion that followed, I facilitated a lively debate among the students and faculty in the audience that touched on such topics as Lopez's manipulation of her physical appearance, whether or not she has "lost her butt," and the amount of agency she has wielded in her career. As I discussed in the conclusions of the previous chapter, I view Lopez as a performer who has benefited from a new and growing opening for Latina stardom in the contemporary environment, and who also will open doors for others through her success, but who also has had to employ limiting and at times denigrating tropes associated with Latina bodies in her star image in order to gain a fan base among non-Latinos. I found that popular opinions of Lopez are extremely varied. Opinions ranged from viewing Lopez as a performer who has "sold out" to cross over to mainstream stardom and thus no longer "represents" Latinos, to viewing her as a positive and powerful role model. And one member of the audience reminded others that Lopez is only one performer, and naturally unable to be everything for all people.

The lack of consensus confirmed for me that definitive conclusions on Latina star images are elusive, if one begins the discussion from the vantage point of popular reception. Stars, like other types of media texts, are polysemic and are

likely to hold very different meanings for different viewers. Additionally, all too often, popular declarations on Latina stars are colored by personal opinions of what a “positive” Latina star should be. Such discussions, for instance, can be colored by idiosyncratic notions of what an authentic Latina looks like, how a positive Latina role model would behave in Hollywood, and so on.

While such discussions have their place, and I also have a personal stake in encouraging positive Latina role models in the media, such debates often can never be resolved. They also can overshadow the important work of scholars and archivists who are working to document and preserve the history of Latinos in Hollywood. Through piecing together this broad history, it becomes possible to begin to theorize Latina and Latino stardom and come to a better understanding of the complicated dynamics of such stardom today. Thus in this study I have aimed to analyze the “what” and “how” of Latina stardom, examining patterns and developments within the industry and the country as a whole that have had an impact on the making and marketing of Latina stars. My conclusions regarding Latina stardom, both within the entertainment industries and in popular culture at large, are directly based on this history.

That such a discussion between students and university faculty could take place at all is a sign of the progress that has been achieved in the realm of Latina stardom, even in the short period of time since my work with Latina teen parents in the mid-1990s inspired me to take up this project. Such actresses as Jennifer Lopez, Rita Moreno, Salma Hayek, Michelle Rodriguez, Rosario Dawson, Elizabeth Peña, Rosie Perez, and Lauren Velez continue to make their mark in Hollywood, and many new actresses are now entering their ranks. Latinas also are increasingly entering the pop culture realms of television and music—which now counts such performers as Lopez, Shakira, Christina Aguilera, Nely Furtado and other Latinas among its ranks, notably in divisions outside realm of Latin music. There thus are many new Latina stars within contemporary popular



culture, role models through which young Latinas might imagine themselves as interesting, powerful, and beautiful. These openings still continue to be for light-skinned performers only, however. The brown-skinned girls and women that I had sought at the onset of this project continue to be elusive. The aesthetic that the Hollywood Latina generally must conform to thus does not reflect the reality of most Latinas sitting in the audience. Given this reality, how much has the situation actually improved?

The case studies I have examined here additionally demonstrate a continuing ambivalence toward Latinas in Hollywood. While the situation has changed dramatically in the last nine decades, some elements and obstacles remain very much the same in the construction of Latina stars. And while Latina stars exist, they are often still marginalized within the industry and in film narratives. In this final chapter I describe these primary patterns that continue to influence the shaping of Latina stardom in Hollywood. To structure this discussion, I focus on the mega-success that Jennifer Lopez has experienced since the late 1990s, and draw as well on the interviews I conducted with Latino and Latina professionals working behind the scenes in the film industry. What can be said regarding the climate toward Latinas in Hollywood today? For that matter, how might Lopez's success influence future opportunity? Ultimately these questions can only be fully answered with four contradicting, though complementary arguments, which is indicative in itself of the intense ambivalence that Latinas continue to face within the contemporary Hollywood milieu.

#### **THE WHITEWASHED LATINA AS GOOD HOLLYWOOD ETHNIC**

Two of these answers, perhaps not surprisingly given what has been gleaned from the previous case studies, are written on the Latina star body. First, as mentioned in the discussion of crossover stardom, even in the present day, only the “whitest” Latinas are given opportunities to act in starring roles in medium-to-

big budget films and promoted in a manner necessary to support such stardom. A yardstick of whiteness is still fundamental, though generally at the hegemonic level of common sense, to Hollywood beauty standards. As casting director Bob Morones explained during my field research, “If you want to be a movie star, you have to look like a movie star.” Latinas who want to be considered for romantic leads and star-making promotional backing, in this manner, have to conform, at least to an extent, to Hollywood aesthetic ideals. As such, while there is a growing opening for Latina stars in the national popular culture, and particularly for images that cast Latinas as smart, capable, and beautiful, I must qualify this statement. As mentioned above, the short and curvy, brown-skinned heroines that I dreamt of prior to exploring this topic still are seldom seen in contemporary Hollywood, while off-white Latinas have a shot at media stardom and “white” Latinas such as Cameron Diaz experience virtually no crossover barriers to being cast and promoted in starring roles.

Such standards continue to have a profound impact on how Latina actors are perceived, cast, and promoted. As discussed previously, elements of this Hollywood standard for Latinas include facial features, body type, skin color, accent, mannerisms, and extratextual star publicity that alludes to class markers such as socioeconomic background and education. Through the traditional paradigm of the Hollywood pigmentocracy, which in the case of Latinos includes class and nationality-related markers that privilege Spanish over indigenous blood, such non-Latinas as Catherine Zeta Jones and Spanish Latinas such as Penelope Cruz often easily eclipse American Latinas in Hollywood. I learned in my interviews that such paradigms influence how even Latino and Latina filmmakers with an eye on mainstream distribution cast their projects, often in the name of “beauty.”

Because of the power of these standards, Latinas often still have to whiten their appearance if they wish to move from ensemble to starring roles. As

discussed in Chapter 1, Margarita Cansino became a star only after she changed her name to Rita Hayworth, dyed her brunette hair red and had her widow's peak removed with electrolysis. Rita Moreno, in contrast, has told interviewers that she likely would have experienced greater opportunity in her first decades in Hollywood if she had straightened her naturally curly hair, as discussed in Chapter 3. And in the last decade, Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek have both lost substantial weight and otherwise conformed to standards that privilege actresses of willowy, Anglo-Saxon body type and appearance, arguably in order to be considered eligible for leading roles in Hollywood films.

Perhaps most telling are photographs of Jennifer Lopez over the course of her career, the subject of the previous chapter. When photographs from her Fly Girl days are placed next to photos from her subsequent years in Hollywood, particularly her most recent photographs, such a whitening process is undeniably evident. The methods used in this transformation become far less important than the end results. Little has changed with respect to these aesthetic ideals since Dolores Del Rio was groomed to better embody Hollywood glamour and body ideals, since Rita Hayworth changed her name and ethnic image and quickly became "America's Sweetheart," or since Rita Moreno as a young *Puertorriqueña* wasn't considered American enough to be cast in starring film roles in the 1950s. Jennifer Lopez's transformation lends evidence to continuing vestiges of Hollywood's imagined ethnic hierarchy that has positioned Latinas as lesser whites in Hollywood diegeses and star publicity since the transition to sound film. Considering that Lopez's Latin ethnicity cannot be denied, however, her current status does lend challenge to this paradigm.

#### **LATINA ACTORS AND CULTURAL RACIALIZATION**

Even while I make this argument, however, a complimentary argument must be added to better reflect the aesthetic and narrative complexity of Latina

stardom in Hollywood film and U.S. popular culture. As discussed in three case studies, Latinas also have been and continue to be “racialized,” in the sense defined by Omi and Winant, in both Hollywood film roles and in star publicity in which their *non*-whiteness is constructed and/or asserted with respect to their accent, personality, and/or particularly their bodies. An insistence on excessive and “enthusiastic” Latina star bodies can be seen as part and parcel of such a racializing dynamic. In addition, narrative techniques that have been used to demarcate and often to marginalize Latina stars or characters that have been mentioned previously include the inclusion of exaggerated Hispanic accents, fiery personalities, and/or a libidinous nature, and the pairing of such stars with “whiter” co-stars who narratively are privileged in the storyline.

Because of this tendency toward racialization in the construction of Latina characters, *extremely* fair-skinned Latinas at times may be less likely to be cast in Latina-designated roles than their counterparts who are slightly darker. The Hollywood Latina Look, as may be immediately apparent, rests on the industry’s ideological need to maintain imagined racial divisions. As discussed previously, Dávila refers to a similar phenomenon in regard to the popularity of a particular “Latin look” in contemporary advertising. In addition, Latino actors and actresses who took part in the study by the Thomas Rivera Policy Institute who said they sometimes don’t get cast in roles because they’re not considered ethnic enough also are describing the same tendency in the filmed entertainment industries. Jennifer Lopez’s penchant for using cosmetic bronzers can be traced to this tendency; it has been important to her star image to maintain a strong public identity as Latina through maintaining an olive or tan complexion and maintain a somewhat curvaceous body, even while at other times she toys with her appearance to such a degree that her *Latinidad* appears optional.

In addition, racializing notions often are integral to the mindset in Hollywood when Latino and Latina characters are developed in storylines and

when actors are directed in such roles. Screenwriter Rosemary Alderete described an illustration of such dynamics, in this case in the realm of children's television, in an interview. Brought in as a consultant to work with a writing team developing a young Latina character for a children's series, she struggled with the team because "they still had a concept of Latinos being angry and [as people who] didn't speak English well and ... didn't know how to really incorporate with the other characters." Through such notions, in addition to traditional aesthetic markers, Latinos and Latinas are confined to positions in film and television story worlds that are marked both as non-white and as marginal to the primary storyline. Such expectations generally negate the possibility of stardom.

To further complicate this discussion, moreover, the demarcation of Latinidad in the shaping of Latina stardom is a complex phenomenon that is not easily interpreted as regressive or progressive. The cultural racialization of Latino actors arguably is expected and desired by some Latino viewers looking for role models who are identifiably ethnic, with the very stereotypes that are criticized by some lending to this authenticity for others. The criticism of Latino stars that appear to undergo a whitening process or flattening of ethnic authenticity in the course of their careers aptly illustrates this complexity in the shaping of Latina and Latino star images.

It can be argued that this dynamic takes place to some extent for all non-white actors in Hollywood film. It is a distinct process for Latinos, however, because skin color and even facial features do not always clearly differentiate Latino from white actors. As mentioned previously, in this manner, Latino and Latina actors provide unique challenge to the status quo of whiteness, distinct from the example of African American actors, who (at times) can easily be differentiated as distinct from the white norm. The process of racialization also must then rest more heavily on non-phenotypical factors such as accent, perceived personality, and em-bodied distinctions, whether perceived or actual. The

exaggerated accent of Carmen Miranda in her later years in Hollywood and emphasis on Rita Moreno's supposed flirtatious and fiery personality are illustrations of such a dynamic, as is the case of the Jennifer Lopez star body and booty.

The previous case studies illustrate the dynamics by which tropes associated with Latina bodies historically have figured heavily into the process of cultural racialization of Latina stars. With respect to the requisite—and in the case of Rita Moreno, occasionally padded—Latina curves within this paradigm, tropes of seductive and sexually “hot” Latina bodies have imbued the shaping of Latina star images throughout the decades, with such developments as the enforcement and later dismantling of the Production Code playing into how these tropes have been manifest in Hollywood film and star publicity in various periods. While the 1930s dictated that Dolores Del Rio was constructed as an elegant clotheshorse with a passionate body beneath her haute couture fashions, Rita Moreno was typecast in a less sophisticated fashion as little other than a seductive and fiery Latin spitfire and inviting body. The deliberate nature of this construction is even more apparent, considering that Moreno's curves in fact were largely a Hollywood creation.

Jennifer Lopez, similarly and dissimilarly, has been marketed to non-Latino and Latino audiences in promotional campaigns that have emphasized drastically different interpretations of the Latina body. Lopez initially garnered star-making publicity and gained greater status in Hollywood through the attention that was called to her curvaceous body and particularly her *derrière* in the entertainment news media in 1998, as discussed in Chapter 4. Such publicity, notably, at times highly exaggerated her voluptuousness. The “butt frenzy” that began at that juncture and has colored her promotion since hearkens back to promotional campaigns that advertised earlier Latina stars such as Rita Moreno and (then not identified as Latina) Raquel Welch. Other contemporary Latina

actors such as Salma Hayek, Rosie Perez, and Michelle Rodriguez arguably have experienced more limited stardom in comparison, in part because of not engaging in such concerted body-oriented publicity.

Lopez's star promotion has proven to be quite complex and at times contradictory with regard to the utilization of body-oriented discourse and images, however. Both progressive shifts and the resilience of traditional ethnic notions have influenced Lopez's successful strategy of alternately playing to tropicalist-inflected stereotypes and moving beyond those expectations. Her image and the usage of such historical tropes has become further complicated in pace with her rising status in Hollywood and in response to the contemporary trend toward semi-emaciated, hyper-fit female star bodies. Lopez continues to play to dueling expectations—of the female star body and the Latina star body—in her public image.

Finally, Latina stars are demarcated as uniquely non-white when they are marketed under the crossover mantle, a construction in 2002 appears to be dwindling. As discussed in previous chapters, such labeling has both racialized Latino performers and commodified them in whitewashed packaging. As a construction primarily utilized to sell Latino performers and Latin culture to white audiences, the distinction of crossover from general stardom reflects the historical and contemporary status of Latinos in the United States, who still are perceived as largely un-American. At its basest, crossover, as a phenomenon that ultimately serves to reinforce racially hegemonic popular culture, merely shakes a little Latin spice in the mix but makes little room for stardom in the real sense of the word for Latinas and Latinos.

Given that its usage has occurred concurrently with the growth of the Latino population and of anti-immigration rhetoric in the U.S. and that the term itself is reminiscent of notions of geographical borders, I've come to view it as a description of the very real limitations that Latinos continue to face within the

Hollywood-based entertainment industries. The decreasing frequency of its usage in the last few years, conversely, is likely a sign of the incremental inclusion that Latinos are beginning to experience in Hollywood and the American imaginary.

### **STILL ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN: LATINOS AND HOLLYWOOD POWER**

That said, this research additionally highlights the continuing importance of power relations in Hollywood. Despite the success that Jennifer Lopez has experienced, the cronyist and often racially exclusive nature of working relationships in the industry continues to contribute to often keeping Latinos on the other side of the color line. In this regard a system of apartness still exists in the industry as well as in the city of Los Angeles itself.

Given that the development of film projects in the industry is a process built upon relationships, working with well-connected professionals in the realms of talent management and promotion is key for actors who wish to further their careers and particularly for the construction and maintenance of the level of stardom necessary to be cast in big-budget film productions. For that matter, creative professionals such as screenwriters, filmmakers, casting directors, producers, and particularly executives all play vital roles as well with respect to Latina stardom. Considering that, as mentioned previously, Latinos still comprise no more than two percent of all professionals in these behind-the-scenes roles, a dramatic underrepresentation considering numbers in the larger population. Latinas will continue be at a disadvantage as long as this imbalance exists.

Jennifer Lopez, for one, is an example of an exceptional Latina who managed to rise within the lopsided Hollywood system. It is important to stress, however, that Jennifer Lopez's individual success belies the social and financial obstacles that Latina actors attempting to find work in Hollywood film still generally face. Lopez's career, in fact, could be held up as an example to propose there are no longer such obstacles, although this would be far from the truth.



In part because of this lack of access to important relationships in the industry and lack of Latino creative and executive personnel, talented Latina actors continue to seldom be given opportunities to prove their box office potential. In addition, Latinas often have to compete with less professional training and experience than their non-Latino counterparts. Grassroots groups such as the actors' group *Nosotros* are trying to fill this need through providing such services as acting classes and audition practice. *Nosotros* and other organizations can't begin to compete with the resources that money can buy with respect to big-dollar training and the management contacts that rule the Los Angeles scene, however.

Within this realm, it is the growing ranks of Latino and Latina filmmakers and other media professionals that promises to make a difference for Latina stardom in the future. Latinas and Latinos are slowly but surely beginning to enter such roles in the Hollywood industries. Thus for the first time since the inception of the U.S. film industry, Latino industry professionals at times can help each other secure jobs and get projects up and running. Call it *Latinowood* or a Latino "good old boys network," but in an industry built upon relationships, gaining such a critical mass can spell the difference in being able to launch new film and television endeavors. (Some of the Latina industry professionals that I interviewed in fact commented that they currently experience as many, if not more obstacles as women in Hollywood than as Latinas).

In addition, a number of national organizations, such as the Latinos in Entertainment Media Institute (LEMI) and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP) are actively working to provide opportunities to new and seasoned Latino film and television professionals with respect to networking, gaining necessary support and training, getting jobs, and launching projects. Through such efforts, avenues are increasing for Latino actors and

actresses to gain experience and exposure that can ultimately lead to star-making roles.

Moreover, an influx of students, including many Latinos, in film and broadcasting schools since the 1990s portends dramatic developments on the horizon with respect to Latino representation and stardom in the coming years. “In the 1990s authorship and hype fueled the full-blown emergence of an earlier trend—the filmmaking aspiration,” as Kleinhans asserts (310). This dream of many young people today was fueled by the success stories of individuals who, against all odds, have managed to forge successful careers. In this regard, current Latino and Latina filmmakers are serving as important positive role models to the filmmakers of the future, who in turn will likely provide opportunities for Latina and Latino actors and would-be stars.

#### **LATINIDAD AND THE NEW FLAVOR OF POPULAR CULTURE**

Perhaps equally important, there is a rising awareness throughout the industry of the potential profits to be made from the Latino audience, as well as a growing awareness and openness to Latino culture in the mainstream American imaginary. A number of the individuals that I interviewed for this project described this growing public interest in Latino performers and culture as currently motivating opportunities. As *Latin Heat* editor and publisher and LEMI president Bel Hernandez noted in an interview, the trappings of Latin culture are now “a little more accepted and understood [in the U.S.]; everything ranging from music to the foods we eat to the styles that come off the street. And all that is reflected into and has moved into the mainstream. I think that it’s a positive message that is being sent.”

An increasingly diverse and culturally tolerant teen audience, in particular, is motivating film studios to produce films and promote film stars that better embody this diversity and desire for cultural flavor. In addition, beauty standards

in the U.S. arguably are beginning to shift, such that a blond, Anglo ideal is no longer the only aesthetic ideal. The success of Jennifer Lopez has both reflected and encouraged this movement. Such a paradigm shift has played a role in encouraging industry executives to cast and promote other Latinas in film roles as well and to distribute the films of Latino and Latina independent filmmakers. Illustrations of these shifts include recent films with young Latina and Latino protagonists such as *Girl Fight* (2000), starring newcomer Michelle Rodriguez, and *Crazy/Beautiful* (2001), starring Jay Hernandez and Kirsten Dunst. These developments point to further opportunity imminent for at least some Latinas, particularly young actresses, in Hollywood film and related media forms.

Given these shifts, the Hollywood entertainment industries are beginning to reconceptualize stardom, with Latino actors and actresses increasingly viewed as having greater star potential. Such actors are at times experiencing greater freedom with respect to casting in Hollywood films, television, and commercials. One young actor interviewed during the course of my research described that as many as a quarter of his auditions in 2000 are non-ethnic-specified, a substantial difference in comparison to Rita Moreno's early decades in Hollywood. Jennifer Lopez, in particular, has not experienced the same limitations in casting and star promotion that Dolores Del Rio and Rita Moreno experienced in previous decades, as discussed in the previous case study.

Another illustration of the improving situation for Latinos and specifically Latinas in Hollywood was provided by Luis Reyes, co-author of an encyclopedia on Latino stars, *Hispanics in Hollywood*. Reyes remarked to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter that the playing field changed drastically for Latinos in Hollywood in the seven years that had passed between the first and second printing of his book. When the book was initially published in 1993, there was little knowledge or attention paid within the realm of the mainstream news media to the topic of Latino stars. Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek had been struggling Hollywood

actresses, mingling with guests at a party that was held to promote the book at the time. At the time of the second printing in 2000, however, a number of Latino stars were well known within American popular culture. Lopez and Hayek, for instance, had become household names with successful careers in Hollywood, even to the extent of having competing projects about Frida Kahlo in the works at the time (Muñoz 28). As the projects of Lopez, Hayek, and others have made money for the industry, “it has shown that there’s a market and that non-Latinos are willing to watch Latinos,” as *Nosotros* president Jerry Velasco noted in an interview in 2000.

As noted previously, the increasing numbers of Latinas and Latinos visible in U.S. popular culture comes with a price, however. Ultimately, the crossover conundrum is one of incorporation. Most particularly, the construction of Latina stars aims to please moviegoing audiences and promote the commodification of other products far more than it aims for verisimilitude or to promote social progress. Through such a process, the Hollywood industries co-opt even while they celebrate *Latinidad*, with these dynamics in constant tension. The palatable packaging of Latin culture in the form of Jennifer Lopez as a star body is illustrative of how some aspects of *Latinidad* now are easily packaged and marketed to the mainstream audience, while others are whitewashed. Latina stars often merely add flavor to Hollywood films and media commodities in such marketing practices, emptied of connection to the realities of Latino American experience, a formulation that is increasingly profitable for media producers. Guerrero calls attention to how Hollywood through such sleight-of-hand dynamics incorporates aspects of and yet erases the hard realities of race in films (“Circus”); this discussion applies equally well to the addition of Latina actors and *Latinidad* to the diegeses and star system otherwise grounded in Hollywood tradition. In this manner, the spectacular rendering of Latina stars can ultimately mask hard realities. Given the current media circus of Hollywood entertainment,

in such dynamics Latina stardom takes on multiple meanings, but has been effectively gutted of much of its progressive potential by the time it is received by the American and global public.

## Appendix A

### Dolores Del Rio Filmography, 1925-1942

*Joanna.* Dir. Edwin Carewe. First National, 1925

*High Steppers.* Dir. Edwin Carewe. First National, 1926.

*Pals First.* Dir. Edwin Carewe. First National, 1926.

*The Whole Town's Talking.* Dir. Edward Laemmle. Universal, 1926.

*What Price Glory?* Dir. Raoul Walsh. Fox Film, 1926.

*Jungle Fever.* Dir. John Griffith Wray. Fox, 1927.

*My Wife's Honor.* Dir. Lou Tellegen. Fox, 1927.

*Resurrection.* Dir. Edwin Carewe. United Artists, 1927.

*Loves of Carmen.* Dir. Raoul Walsh. Fox, 1927.

*Gateway of the Moon.* Dir. John Griffith Wray. Fox, 1928.

*Trail of '98.* Dir. Clarence Brown. MGM, 1928.

*Ramona.* Dir. Edwin Carewe. United Artists, 1928.

*The Red Dance.* Dir. Raoul Walsh. Fox, 1928.

*No Other Woman..* Dir. Lou Tellegen. Fox Film, 1928.

*Revenge.* Dir. Raoul Walsh. United Artists, 1928.

*Evangeline.* Dir. Edwin Carewe. United Artists, 1929.

*The Bad One.* Dir. George Fitzmaurice. United Artists, 1930.

*Girl of the Rio.* Dir. Herbert Brenan. RKO, 1932.

*Bird of Paradise.* Dir. King Vidor. RKO, 1932.

*Flying Down to Rio.* Dir. Thornton Freeland. RKO, 1933.

*Wonder Bar.* Dir. Lloyd Bacon. Warner Bros., 1934.

*In Caliente.* Dir. Lloyd Bacon. Warner Bros., 1935.

*I Live for Love.* Dir. Busby Berkeley. Warner Bros., 1935.

*The Widow From Monte Carlo.* Dir. Arthur Greville Collins. Warner Bros.,  
1936.

*Accused.* Dir. Thornton Freeland. United Artists, 1936.

*Devil's Playground.* Dir. Erle C. Kenton. Columbia Pictures, 1937.

*Ali Baba Goes to Town.* Dir. David Butler. Fox, 1937.

*Lancer Spy.* Dir. Gregory Ratoff. Fox, 1937.

*International Settlement.* Dir. Eugene Forde. Fox, 1938.

*The Man From Dakota.* Dir. Leslie Fenton. Loew's/MGM, 1940.

*Journey Into Fear.* Dir. Norman Foster. RKO, 1942.

## Appendix B

### Rita Moreno Filmography

*So Young, So Bad.* Dir. Bernard Vorhaus. United Artists, 1950.

*Toast of New Orleans.* Dir. Norman Taurog. Prod. Joe Pasternak. MGM, 1950.

*Pagan Love Song.* Dir. Robert Altman. Prod. Arthur Freed. MGM, 1950.

*Singin' in the Rain.* Dirs. Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly. MGM, 1952.

*The Fabulous Senorita.* Dir. R.G. Springsteen. Republic, 1952.

*The Ring.* Dir. Kurt Neumann. King Bros., 1952.

*Cattle Town.* Dir. Noel Smith. Warner Bros., 1952.

*Ma and Pa Kettle on Vacation.* Dir. Charles Lamont. Universal, 1953.

*Latin Lovers.* Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. MGM, 1953.

*El Alamein.* Dir. Fred F. Sears. Columbia Pictures, 1953.

*Fort Vengeance.* Dir. Lesley Salander. Allied Artists, 1953.

*Jivaro.* Dir. Edward Ludwig. Paramount, 1954.

*Yellow Tomahawk.* Dir. Lesley Salander. United Artists, 1954.

*Garden of Evil.* Dir. Henry Hathaway. Twentieth Century Fox, 1954.

*Untamed.* Dir. Henry King. Twentieth Century Fox, 1955.

*Seven Cities of Gold.* Dir. Robert D. Webb. Twentieth Century Fox, 1955.

*The Lieutenant Wore Skirts.* Dir. Frank Tashlin. Twentieth Century Fox, 1955.

*The King and I.* Dir. Walter Lang. Twentieth Century Fox, 1956.

*The Vagabond King.* Dir. Michael Curtiz. Paramount, 1956.

*The Deerslayer.* Dir. Kurt Neumann. Twentieth Century Fox, 1957.



*The Rebel Breed*. Dir. Richard L. Bare. Warner Bros., 1960.

*West Side Story*. Dirs. Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise. United Artists, 1961.

*Summer and Smoke*. Dir. Peter Glenville. Paramount, 1961.

*Samar*. Dir. George Montgomery. Warner Bros., 1962.

*Cry of Battle*. Dir. Irving Lerner. Allied Artists, 1963.

*The Night of Following Day*. Dir. Hubert Cornfield. MCA/Universal, 1969.

*Popi*. Dir. Arthur Hiller. United Artists/MGM, 1969.

*Marlowe*. Dir. Paul Bogart. MGM, 1969.

*Carnal Knowledge*. Dir. Mike Nichols. AVCO Embassy, 1971.

*The Ritz*. Dir. Richard Lester. Scr. Terrence McNally. Warner Bros., 1976.

*The Boss's Son*. Dir. Bobby Roth. Circle Films, 1978.

*Happy Birthday, Gemini*. Dir. Richard Benner. United Artists, 1980.

*The Four Seasons*. Dir. Alan Alda. Universal, 1981.

*Age Isn't Everything*. Dir. Douglas Katz. Dist. info. unavailable, 1992.

*Italian Movie*. Dir. Robert Monticello. Dist. unavailable, 1993.

*I Like It Like That*. Dir. Darnell Martin. Columbia Pictures/Izaro, 1994.

*Angus*. Dir. Patrick Read Johnson. New Line/Lauren, 1995.

*Slums of Beverly Hills*. Dir. Tamara Jenkins. Twentieth Century Fox/Fox Searchlight, 1998.

*Carlo's Wake*. Dir. Mike Valerio. Four Star Productions. 1999.

*Blue Moon*. Dir. John Galagher. Castle Hill/Curb Entertainment, 2000.

*Piñero*. Dir. Leon Ichaso. Miramax, 2002.

*Casa De Los Babys*. Dir. John Sayles. 2002.

## Appendix C

### Jennifer Lopez Filmography

*My Little Girl.* Dir. Connie Kaiserman. Hemdale Film, 1986.

*My Family/Mi Familia.* Dir. Gregory Nava. New Line Cinema, 1995.

*Money Train.* Dir. Joseph Ruben. Columbia Pictures, 1995.

*Jack.* Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Buena Vista, 1996.

*Selena.* Dir. Gregory Nava. Warner Bros., 1997.

*U-Turn.* Dir. Oliver Stone. Tri Star, 1997.

*Blood and Wine.* Dir. Bob Rafelson. Twentieth Century Fox/Fox Searchlight,  
1997.

*Anaconda.* Dir. Luis Llosa. Columbia Pictures, 1997.

*Antz* (voice). Dirs. Eric Darnell, Tim Johnson (voice). Columbia Pictures, 1997.

*Out of Sight.* Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Universal, 1998.

*The Cell.* Dir. Tarsem Singh. New Line, 2000.

*The Wedding Planner.* Dir. Adam Shankman. Columbia Pictures, 2001.

*Angel Eyes.* Dir. Luis Mandoki. Warner Bros., 2001.

*Enough.* Dir. Michael Apted. Columbia Pictures, 2002.

## Appendix D

### Interviews by the Author

Abounza, Bonnie, Bel Hernandez, and Sandy Varga. Beverly Hills, Calif.

Early August, 2000.

Alderete, Rosemary. Screenwriter. Silverlake, Calif. July 18, 2000.

de los Santos, Nancy. Writer-producer. Los Angeles, Calif. June 23, 2000.

Diaz, Ken. Makeup Artist. Phone interview. June 28, 2000.

Esparza, Moctesuma. Producer. Beverly Hills, Calif. Late July 2000.

Hernandez, Bel. Editor-in-chief and publisher, *Latin Heat*; chairperson, Latinos  
in Entertainment Media Institute. Beverly Hills, Calif. August 1, 2000.

Morones, Bob. Casting director. Los Angeles, Calif. June 13, 2000.

Pozo, Santiago. Marketing executive. West Hollywood, Calif. August 4, 2000.

Racho, Susan. Writer-producer. Glendale, Calif. July 2000.

Reyes, Luis. Publicist/Scholar. Hollywood, Calif. June 30, 2000.

Rivas, Monica. Actor. Hollywood, Calif. August 2, 2000.

Seshilling, Monalee. Agent. Los Angeles, Calif. July 2000.

Varga, Sandy. Advertising manager, *Latin Heat*. Beverly Hills, Calif. August 1,  
2000.

Velasco, Jerry. President, Nosotros. Hollywood, Calif. June 21, 2000.

Susana Zepeda. Producer. Los Angeles, Calif. Late July 2000.

Pedro Zamora. Actor. Hollywood California. August 2, 2000.

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## **Vita**

Mary Caudle Beltrán was born Mary Ann Caudle on May 31, 1966 in Seattle, Washington, to Rodney Caudle and Veronica Beltrán Caudle. She graduated in 1984 from Carbondale Community High School in Illinois. Ms. Beltrán went on to earn a Bachelor of Science degree in Journalism from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale in May 1988. After a few years of working as a newspaper editor and community educator/counselor for an anti-violence project, she entered graduate school to pursue a Master of Science degree in Social Work. Ms. Beltrán was awarded this degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in May 1993. Several years of working as a social worker, mainly with youth and families of color, followed in Madison and San Francisco, California. Ms. Beltrán entered the doctoral program in Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas in 1997. While a doctoral student, she has worked as a teaching assistant and assistant instructor in Radio-Television-Film, teaching courses in introductory film history and assisting in courses on topics related to ethnic and particularly Latino representation and participation in film, television, and news media. She also has served as a research assistant on academic projects, most recently as lead research associate on a Ford Foundation-funded project examining past and present initiatives to improve the employment and representation of people of color in the U.S. entertainment television industry. Ms. Beltrán has published in academic forums and presented at national conferences

on topics related to Latino participation and representation in U.S. film and television. Ms. Beltrán began using her mother's maiden name professionally in 1990 to reflect her Mexican heritage, and made this a legal name change in early 2002.

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